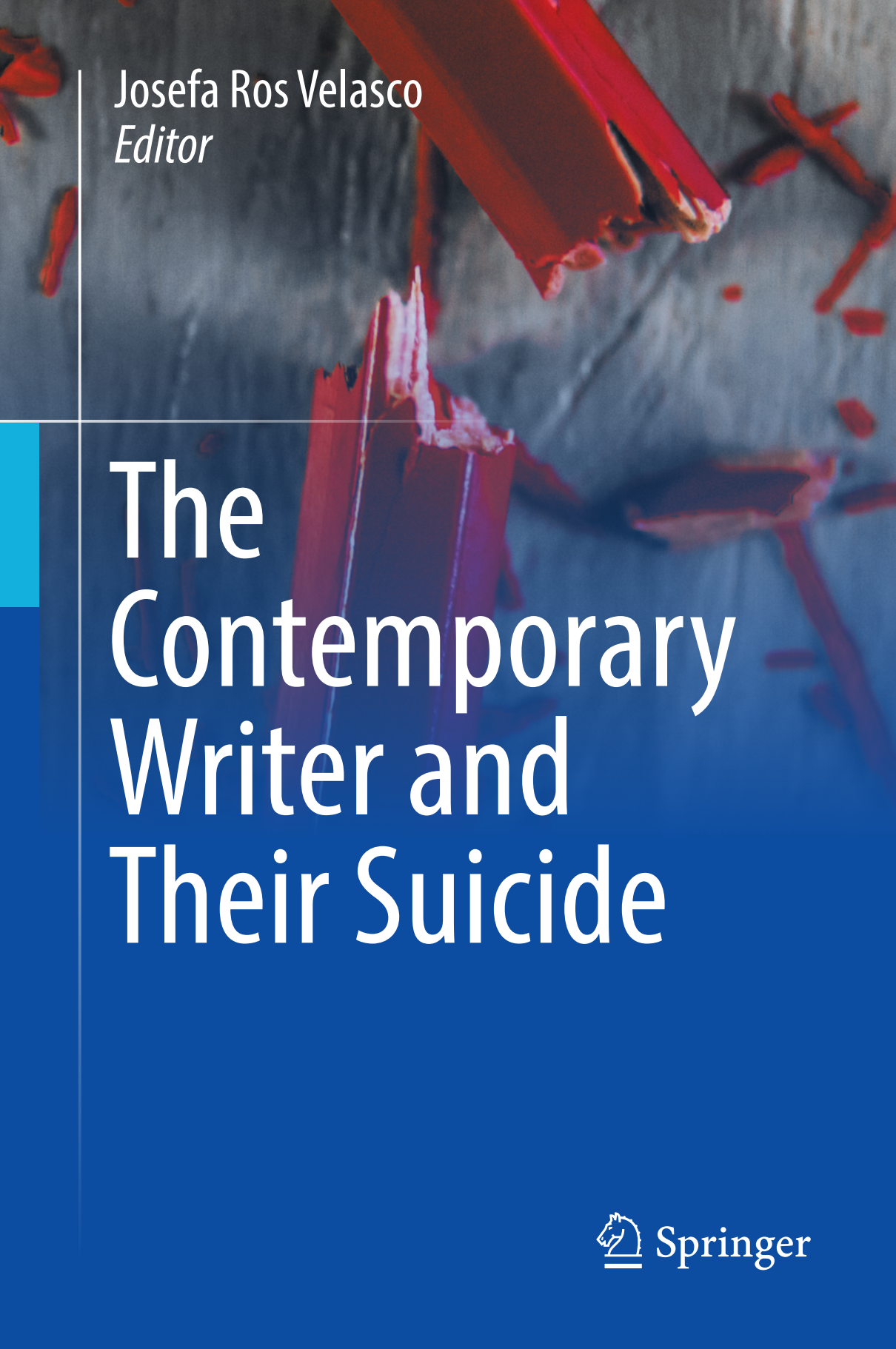

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Preface

Some issues are not named, and what is not named does not exist in our minds. Undoubtedly, there are issues that we do not like to talk about. We prefer to look the other way as if that were enough to obviate the existence of that which repulses us, which we do not like, which causes us fear, or which even calls into question some of our deepest beliefs. This denial of reality applies to countless issues, and we do it every day, thus trying to ignore a part of the world. Perhaps, by not naming it, we are unconsciously trying to make the terrible reality behind the forbidden concept disappear. And so, we continue tiptoeing around certain issues, leaving them semi-obscured in the daily information battle and thus neglecting potential answers. But this is not what we are going to do in the book you have in your hands.

Suicidal people are people who have lost hope, that which is said to be the last thing to be lost. Hopelessness becomes a state of mind, an unalterable reality driven by an anticipatory anxiety of a future in which the pain does not cease. Suicidal people have lost hope in themselves, in their situation, in the meaning of their own time on earth, and, quite possibly, even in the meaning of life. Suicide has not to do so much with the desire to die, but with the desire to put an end to one's own situation of suffering.

This intolerable suffering for one's own self can be caused by many factors, both internal and external, and many others will play a role in its deepness. This pain is reproduced within the person without an end in sight. Even if it may disappear at specific moments, it will also echo in the background of your inner self even when you laugh, look at something beautiful, or politely greet your neighbor in the third elevator. Waking up in the morning becomes a hideous effort, and to see the light when we open our eyes is to return to the inner darkness, that basement of ourselves where bad feelings are reignited, scorching emotions that weigh on our bones at every step. The reasons behind the act of taking one's own life are multiple, and the intervening factors are very diverse, even though, in an act of social self-defense, we try to simplify such a complex decision by seeking monocausal explanations.

Suicide is an individual act that carries with it the manifestation of one of the great malfunctions of our societies: the group has failed to protect the individual. Sometimes the driver is society itself, with its uncontrolled demands, causing the

individual's psychological and social capacities to be overwhelmed. The widespread neglect of mental health and the panic that seems to be provoked by naked emotions and their treatment are certainly no help in avoiding this tragedy.

Its prevalence is so high in the world that the World Health Organization speaks of the "global suicide epidemic" (WHO, 2021): in 2019, an estimated 703,000 people died by suicide. It is not a problem of rich or poor countries: while suicide is a public health problem in countries of all income levels, most suicides (77%) occur in low- and middle-income countries. However, the suicide rate is highest in high-income countries (10.9 per 100,000). The country's poverty increases the predisposition, but it is not the essential fuel.

It is much more frequent among males than among females in all regions of the world: globally, 12.6 per 100,000 males take their own lives compared to 5.4 women per 100,000. This does not mean, however, that female is safe: 59,030 women took their own lives in 2019. Females in lower-middle-income countries had the highest suicide rate (7.1 per 100,000) compared to females in other income-level groupings. Males in high-income countries had the highest rate (16.5 per 100,000) as compared to males in other income-level groupings. However, the location on the map is not innocent, nor are the structural issues: Lesotho (Africa), characterized as the country with the second highest HIV-positive rate (21.1% in 2020, behind Eswatini, with 26.8%), has the highest suicide rates among both males and females (146.9 suicides and 34.6 per 100,000, respectively) (WHO, 2022).

Suicide knows no age limits, although it is one of the main causes of death among young people. Suicide was the fourth leading cause of death in young people aged 15–29 years for both sexes, the same when we look at the age group 15–19. However, turning one's birthday is not a protection: globally, suicide rates are highest in people aged 70 years and older. And suicides globally follow a standard pattern: the older the age group, the higher the death rate (Ritchie et al., 2015).

Despite the figures referred to, this is a little-known reality, as the data are not always reliable nor are the forms of measurement so homogeneous between countries, which should lead us to the suspicions that the figures may be even higher. It is quite possible that some deaths' cause appears under the heading of "accidents" to avoid gossip and even social punishment. Historically, death by suicide has been a taboo that no one wants to refer to. Death by suicide has also been a stigmatizer for all survivors. If pregnant women could not enter the front door of the church on their wedding day, suicides were buried secretly and shamefully outside the cemetery grounds. The god (or gods) who had abandoned suicidal people in their vital suffering seemed not to want to welcome them either after the decision taken.

The shame behind the suicide was such that families have chosen to hide the tragedy and, sometimes, have tried to forget the deceased. Suicide has been understood as a family affront, as a kind of shadow that would remain over the family; suicide has not been understood but despised. We remember the story of Juana who, having passed that age when in very small towns you were condemned as an "old maid" and not fit for marriage, "fell down the window accidentally" after a fierce argument with her father. Nothing more was said about her death, and family and friends did not meet at the deceased's house to keep vigil over her body and keep the

family company, as was customary in Juana's hometown. The murmur followed the walking of her twin sister, lame from birth, although under the tacit agreement not to name Juana out loud. In a town where it is pride and custom to honor the dead, Juana did not deserve to have photos of her kept, nor was she named in front of her father, although the lie got her buried in the municipal cemetery. If Juana ended her life, her family decided to end her name and her existence. The control exercised by some and suffered by others sometimes goes beyond the limits of life. The rest of the neighbors were not only mute witnesses but accomplices in the symbolic ostracism to which she was condemned after her death.

In the face of the social connivance that silences suicide and the pain it carries with it (for those who commit it, for those who think about it, for those who survive it), written words stand as a refuge and a loudspeaker. In societies that seem to disregard emotional education and mental health, literature can become the only space of permitted deviation for those who suffer, a space in which emotions can be explored, shelled, and dissected, no matter how ugly or rejectable a priori they may be. Literature allows us to understand and look our feelings in the eye in the framework of a society that is not ready for it. Reading and writing are also ways to reconcile with oneself and with the self-loathing that life sometimes brings with it.

This unspoken silence, the failure to address emotions, is not a minor issue. From the cradle to the grave, the society invites us to ignore certain feelings and emotions: we are not socialized to feel, but to be. We are expected to produce, act, and react, instead of just being. In this sense, literature is not only capable of addressing the act of self-sabotage that suicide entails; it also allows us to bring to the table the absurdity of some realities, to empathize with the pain of the suicidal person and of sheltering the survivor. Literature, even with its tendency to romanticize pain, also allows us to realize that hopelessness has temporal limitations. From the role of the mere spectator without emotional involvement, we may dissociate ourselves from Emma Bovary, from her bad life decisions, and from those in which she anticipates her own death. We may also judge Romeo and Juliet themselves, as guilty in part of the eternal misunderstanding. From the outside, we can analyze the pains of others, and so, understand and see, in their emotions, our owns reflected. Literature allows us to speak of what in real life is not named; literature allows us to recognize the pain associated with suicide to exist.

We see literature as a refuge that can help us to channel our pain, protect us, understand us, and, for all that, save us. In literature, we can try to analyze suicide and the associated pain, prevent it, and restore Juana's vital illusion. Through reading, we can recognize and address the most painful emotions of various characters, their fear of life, and their doubts about its meaning. In this way of recognizing the emotions of others and their implicit analysis, we can also apprehend our own. As suicidologist David Lester has stated, studying suicide in literature can help us to understand this complex phenomenon because each literary suicide can be seen as a study case that "may serve as archetypes of suicidal behavior and which may provide insights into suicidal behavior" that we could not merely recognize from "the clinical material in the files of psychiatric hospitals or psychotherapists' offices" (2021, pp. 4, 5).

Having this in mind, the editor of this volume created in 2019 an international and multidisciplinary network of experts interested in approaching suicide from a humanistic perspective focused on how literature and writing can be useful when it comes to understanding the ins and outs and the causes underlying suicidal ideation and the consummation of the suicidal act and its prevention. With the support of the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard University, a two-day meeting was organized in May 2019, titled *Depression as a creative and destructive force in contemporary literature*, in which some ideas began to take shape around the couple suicide and literature. As a result of that meeting, the first part of this volume was published in 2021, entitled *Suicide in Modern Literature: Social Causes, Existential Reasons, and Prevention Strategies*.

In that first collective book, specialists from all over the world and from numerous disciplines came together, including Jared Stark (Eckerd College), Katrina Jaworski (University of South Australia), Anita Virga (University of the Witwatersrand), Barbara Hawellek (Beta Clinic Bonn), Michelle Falkoff (Northwestern University School of Law), Andrew Bennett (University of Bristol), and Jeffrey Berman (University at Albany), to name a few. We aimed to explore the suicide of some of the characters of recognized contemporary literary works of fiction within the American and European geographical context and draw conclusions about the social, philosophical, and psychological reasons for which these fictional characters took their own lives or attempted against their physical integrity.

We learned that agency in suicide is more than human and depends on nonhuman materiality. In other words, that suicide is a social fact, a by-product of every society. Some chapters put into question the decisive role that suicide plays in modern visions of the ethical subject and the ethical society, paying attention, overall, to the social ills that prompt suicide. They highlighted the role of gender by showing that societies that objectify women and do not respect female creativity, beauty, and genius are one of the top reasons for women to commit suicide and that the masculine gaze on feminine expectations often contributes to women live by obeying strict rules for fear of shame and social punishment. And we concluded that suicide is a phenomenon with enormous political implications that affect both women and men, depending on skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, incarceration, impoverishment, social division and contradictions, ideological underpinnings and tensions among private and public property, the modern social relations and production relations, and the economic and moral crisis that generate the sensation of being living a false life.

We stated that it is necessary to claim the public response and acknowledgment of social responsibility to address the problem of suicide. But we also understood that society is not the only cause of suicide. Many times, suicidal behavior is related to our most profound and unfathomable instincts and impulses. After delving into the indeterminate and moral agency of persons who commit suicide to reveal some internal and subjective causes of suicide, we realized that libidinous instincts such as primary aggression and defended aggression (which turns into auto-aggressive behavior) and an extreme susceptibility to narcissistic injury in a person are

responsible for the suicide. On many occasions, suicide revealed to be just a matter of immaturity, weakness, psychological vulnerability, of cases of social isolation and loss of cultural origin, and also as a consequence of being suffering from severe depression and meaningless sensations. Suicide may be the result of the struggle for existence. People with a high sensibility as well as high reflection levels, who are continuously struggling with self-analysis and philosophical and psychological speculations, and who feel the absurdity of life, on the one hand, and long for a deeper sense and transcendence, on the other hand, might get caught up in an existential crisis that leads to suicide.

As an example, some of the works that served to facilitate reflection and analysis of suicidal behavior through characters from modern fictional works were those by authors such as Edith Wharton (*The Gods Arrive*), Jeffrey Eugenides (*The Virgin Suicides*), Susan Glaspell (*Bernice*), Luigi Capuana (*Giacinta* and *Il Marchese di Roccaverdina*), Giovanni Verga (*Una peccatrice* and *Eros*), Margarita Nelken (*Mi suicidio*), Guido Morselli (*Dissipatio H. G.*), William Styron (*Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness*), Paulo Coelho (*Veronika Decides to Die*), Joost Zwagerman (*Zes sterren*), or Yiyun Li (*Where Reasons End*), among others. In addition, we had an introduction written by Lester in which he explained the nature of psychological studies on suicide, the emergence of the sub-discipline called suicidology, and the role of literature to represent suicide imagery and its background.

With this title, we demonstrated that fictional literature could serve the purpose of understanding better the phenomenon of suicide, its most inaccessible impulses, and its main causes beyond the knowledge offered by studies in suicidology and the conclusions from modern neuropsychiatry. Furthermore, this first effort helped us to understand that literature has the potential to prevent suicide, because reading suicidal experiences, even if they are fictitious, helps researchers to get closer to the nature of suicide and develop preventive strategies, but it also helps readers to identify with the characters and find comfort and guidance. We evidenced that engaging in conversations with characters of modern literature is useful for avoiding suicidal ideation resulting from loss, trauma, anger, guilt, sorrow, or regret. In the same vein, fictional narrations based on the relationship between psychiatrists and patients proved to be also truly educative and taught us why hopes are vital in life.

Furthermore, thanks to that prequel, we learned that not only literary reading but also writing itself could be a valuable tool when it comes to understanding and preventing suicide. On the one hand, writing about suicide can be therapeutic for the writer itself. This was an idea inspired by Berman's chapter (2021), in which he demonstrated how encouraging students to write self-disclosing essays and diaries about suicide may have educational and therapeutic benefits. According to Lester and Terry (1992), when writers initiate a process of revision of their works, this allows the distancing of the self from one's problems. Writing about suicide is not for sure a guarantee that one will be able to prevent their own or others' suicide—prediction not always translates into prevention. Silverman and Will (1986) analyzed the life and suicide of Sylvia Plath and concluded that, although she tried to control her suicidal impulses by means of her poetry, she failed in this endeavor. Of course, not everyone approves this therapeutic interaction between psychology and

literature, but, with Lester (2021), we argue that the craft of writing might keep writers alive for years before (and after) they finally commit suicide.

Moreover, on the other hand, we believe that, with care and forewarning, the psychologists and the loved ones of the suicidal writers can find in the realm of their literature a rich source of materials for understanding and preventing suicide. Many writers of all times have recorded, through direct mentions or veiled signals, their intention to commit suicide in their art pieces or autobiographical works. Sometimes they have made true declarations of intent. They have based their novels and poems on their own experiences, so their works can be considered autobiographical. This is true, for example, of the novelists Ernest Hemingway and Cesare Pavese and the poets Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, all of whom died by suicide, and some authors have also written diaries and letters that have been preserved (Lester, 2021). Other times they have only hinted at their desire to end their lives through the use of certain words to which they give a particular meaning and which are used repeatedly; metaphors that hide the feeling of anguish in the face of a life that cannot continue; dark reflections on life and death and the meaning that is given to them; regrets about a certain state of physical and/or mental health, and even criticism of the social structure that determines their way of life. For example, Lester (2021, p. 6) "found that the use of dark shading increased dramatically as the day of Plath's suicide grew close, indicating the increased likelihood of acting out." Also, in her poem *Daddy*, written a few months before her suicide, Plath used the word *dark* six times.

As new experts joined the network, we began to think that it could be a very interesting exercise to analyze the works of some contemporary authors who had committed suicide or had attempted to put an end to their life to try to bring to light those clues that, if they had been understood in all their form and expression, could have alerted psychologists and the closest circles of these writers about their intentions in order to be prevented. The aim of undertaking this new and complementary volume was to demonstrate that the practice of writing can contribute to the potential prevention of suicide if we, the readers, are trained to identify these clues in the authors' writings, thanks to a deep knowledge of their biographies, social contexts, and literary styles. We thought that in cases of potential vulnerability and possible suicidal ideation, involving suicide bombers in the activity of writing can be crucial to, from the outside, understand the last consequences of their personal state and the causes that are leading them to commit suicide or to think about suicide, as well as to offer them support in a more personalized and direct way and to detect their intentions even without them explicitly materializing them.

As part of this training to detect possible suicidal ideation through the writing of people at risk, some members of the network ventured to choose a contemporary author who had committed or had attempted to commit suicide to analyze their works in depth and share what aspects we should pay attention to in writing, in different cases, to be able to anticipate the act of suicide. This could enrich further research to bring this exercise to preventive practice in the clinical setting. To start working on this new project, in the summer of 2021, a large group of researchers met to give rise to an international conference entitled *I want to die: The*

contemporary author and their suicide, organized by the editor of this volume with the support of the Department of Philosophy and Society of the Faculty of Philosophy at Complutense University of Madrid, to share our inquiries concerning the different cases chosen. After the meeting, the researchers prepared texts in which they collected their approaches and presented their conclusions. This volume, which is nothing more than the continuation of *Suicide in Modern Literature*, and of a far-reaching project to know and prevent suicide using alternative techniques to the traditional ones, compiles these texts to bring them to the attention of the interested reader.

To sum up, while the first volume of the series analyzed the social and contextual causes of suicide, the existential and philosophical reasons for committing suicide, and the prevention strategies that modern fictional literature places at our disposal, the second part analyzes the literary, philosophical, and biographical works of contemporary writers across the world who really attempted to commit suicide or achieved their goal, looking for covert and overt clues about their intentions in their writings to (1) continue shedding light on the social and structural causes that lead to suicide and on the suicidal mind, and also (2) to show that people assiduous to writing usually reflect their intentions to commit suicide in their writings, (3) to explain how these usually veiled intentions can be revealed and interpreted, and (4) to highlight the potential of artistic, philosophical, and autobiographical writing as a tool to detect suicidal ideation and prevent its consummation in vulnerable people.

The display of contents in this volume, titled *The Contemporary Writer and Their Suicide*, is divided into three parts that look for clues about suicidal ideation in the contemporary writers' (1) allusions to their contexts and the socio-structural and environmental violence and pressures they suffered; (2) expressions of their will and agency, feelings of dislocation between the individual and the reality, and existential alienation; and (3) literary styles, writing techniques, and metaphorical language.

First, in "Part I: Suicide in Contemporary Writers Caused by Socio-Structural and Environmental Violence and Pressures," we have the study of female suicidal writers in whose works the suicidal intention can be recognized through their constant complaints about the patriarchal system that oppresses them. The selected writers to be analyzed as case studies were Karoline von Günderrode, Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf, and Sara Shagufta. Also, we have chosen some male suicidal writers who manifested their suicidal ideation in their texts in response to different moral, historical, and structural pressures of their times. The list of authors includes Felipe Trigo, Franz Kafka, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Paul Celan, and Gilles Deleuze.

The first chapter in this part, "Beyond the Wertherian *Motif* of Suicide: The Unity of the Self in Karoline von Günderrode's Death," by Julia Kowitz García (Complutense University of Madrid), examines the root causes of Karoline von Günderrode's suicide in 1806 through a thorough analysis of the society of her time, the prevailing gender roles in Europe, and her philosophical ideas, often framed by her longing to preserve the unity of the self. The second chapter, ""I Manage It": Analyzing Tropes of Suicide in Sylvia Plath's Writing," by Pooja Yadav (Independent Scholar), argues that patriarchal paradigms on womanhood, reflected in Plath's

writings, become a site to explore one's own place in society vis-à-vis external labels and categories assigned by society on women that can lead to suicide. In "Virginia Woolf's Suicidal Character(s): Schizophrenia and the Rebellion Against the Body and the Self in Her Literary Works," by Diego Carretero Román (Complutense University of Madrid), the author shows that Virginia Woolf's suicide in 1941 can be seen, through her works, as a rational and deliberated act against an imposed psychiatric treatment that isolated her and prevented her from ruling over her own self. The last chapter on a female writer in this section, ""Death Beats in My Heart Everyday": A Sociological Reading of Suicidal Intent in Sara Shagufta's Works," by Rashmi Joshi (Indian Institute of Technology (ISM) Dhanbad), focuses on Sara Shagufta's works and her interactions with the cultural, social, and political system of the patriarchal society of Pakistan to contextualize her suicide as a structural issue.

Continuing with the male writers of this first part, Andy Eric Castillo Patton (Complutense University of Madrid) has written "Inside the Medical Suicidal Mind: Felipe Trigo's Death by Suicide and Its Self-Novelization as a Way of Understanding Suicide in Contemporary Practitioners," a chapter that highlights the suicidal mind of medical practitioners, following Felipe Trigo's oeuvre, who fiercely criticized modern society and its dual morality. In a similar line is the next chapter, "The Problem of Suicide in Kafka: An Ethical or Aesthetical Problem?", by Fabio Bartoli (Compensar University Foundation), which shows how Kafka thought of taking his life because of the despair caused by the new job that his father tried to impose on him in the family factory. "The Tragedy of Vladimir Mayakovsky: Suicide as a Dialectical Dilemma," by Mary Elliott (University of California, Davis), explores the ways in which Mayakovsky's personal philosophical position, as one who believed that there was hope for freedom from the dialectic in the future, contributed to an overwhelming hopelessness in the face of state oppression. Paul Celan is the author chosen by Fernando Gilabert Bello (Heidegger Archive-University of Seville), in "Paul Celan: The Abyss of the Word "Forgiveness,"" to delve into how the Jewish condition and the experience in the Holocaust can be a reason for committing suicide when the victim is not repaid. Finally, Alison Parks (Stetson University) explains Deleuze's suicide as an exit from contemporary power relations in ""Lines of Flight": The Deterritorialization of Gilles Deleuze."

In "Part II: Suicide in Contemporary Writers as an Expression of the Will, the Dislocation Between the Individual and the Reality, and Existential Alienation," the contributors analyze suicidal ideation in the writings of Philipp Mainländer, Simone Weil, Gilles Deleuze, William Styron, Leo Tolstoy, Carlo Michelstaedter, Robert E. Howard, Ryūnosuke Akutagawa, Osamu Dazai, and Unica Zürn from their expressed reflections in their works on the will to die, their manifestations of their feelings of dislocation among themselves and the reality, and their experience of existential alienation.

The chapter that opens this section, "The Ontological Suicide of Philipp Mainländer: A Search for Redemption Through Nothingness," by Paolo Humberto Gajardo Jaña (University of Chile), states that through the works of Mainländer it is possible to identify signs for his eventual suicide, understood within his

philosophical system as an ontological need or a search for redemption. Later, Myriam Rodríguez del Real (UNED) explains that Simon Weil's suicide can be seen as an act of will to meet again with God in "Simone Weil, Martyr or Suicidal? Between Martyrdom and Suicide: The Question of the Meaning of Life and Death." In "The Fall of a Legend: Deleuze's Suicide and His Spinoza," María de las Mercedes López Mateo (Autonomous University of Madrid) maintains that Deleuze's suicide ideation was indeed present, against all odds, in his philosophical works, as an act of extreme will of a person who accepts that his time of life has come to an end. This idea contradicts the other stated by Robyn Gaier (Gannon University) in "Is Suicide a Choice? Suicide and *Sophie's Choice* in William Styron," according to which suicide, while an intentional action, can fail to be a choice, as it can be seen in Styron's works.

Moving from will toward dislocation between the individual and reality, Morgan Rempel (Georgia Southern University) has written "Mortality and Meaninglessness: Leo Tolstoy and Mickey Sachs Reconsidered," a chapter in which he shows that Tolstoy was about to commit suicide because he was unable to find meaning in existence due to a crisis of faith. In "Carlo Michelstaedter and the Philosophical Suicide," Juan Ignacio Iturraspe Staps (UNED) rationalizes how Michelstaedter was impelled toward suicide by his philosophical conscience of the irrationality and sameness of society and existence. "Two-Gun Bob on the Pyre: Robert E. Howard's Suicide in the Context of His Life and Work," by Thomas Schwaiger (Institute of Linguistics at the University of Graz), reveals how Howard's writings show that it was his certainty that life is meaningless, that human beings go from nothing to nothing, what led him to suicide. Ana Rodríguez Quetglas (UNED) contributes chapter "The Confusing Anxiety of Ryūnosuke Akutagawa," in which the suicide of the Japanese writer is understood as a result of his fear and anxiety about the future in a hostile world that alienates him. In a similar vein, Dazai's work is analyzed in "Through the Mask. Behind the Osamu Dazai's Smile," by Andrea Marín Gil (Complutense University of Madrid), as an example of an exercise of writing in which the author states his intention to commit suicide through their claims about the emptiness and alienation of his life. Closing this part, the chapter "The Catastrophe of the Self: The Case of Unica Zürn," by Leonor Saro García (Complutense University of Madrid), focuses on the announced suicide of the German writer by means of her expression about her dislocation between herself and the outside world and her extreme awareness of the absolutism of reality.

Finally, "Part III: Suicide in Contemporary Writers Understood Through Their Literary Styles, Their Writing Techniques, and Their Metaphorical Language," analyzes veiled and unveiled suicidal intentions in the works of Sylvia Plath, Cesare Pavese, Anne Sexton, May Ayim, Zha Haisheng, Brooke Shields, Elif Şafak, and Fuani Marino, paying attention exclusively to their literary techniques, writing styles, and the use of metaphors.

The first chapter of this section, by David Lester (Stockton University in Galloway), is entitled "Sylvia Plath: Suicidal Tendencies in Life, Poems, and Fiction." In it, Lester examines Plath's writings and describes the motivations that resulted in her death by suicide, looking at her mental conditions reflected in their

poems and compiling linguistic analyses of her poetry. Also on Plath's poetry, Anindita Adhikari (University of Delhi) defines, in "Dying Is an Art: Death in the Art of Sylvia Plath," the metaphors that the writer recurrently used in some of her most famous works to shed light on her suicide. Fionnula Simpson (University of Galway) does the same, in "One Wrist, Then the Other Wrist: The Mind Style of a Suicidal Protagonist as Portrayed in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*," by examining Plath's mental style reflected in her poetry through linguistic analysis. Computational analysis is used by Anna Carson (Emerson College) in "Reflection of Suicidal Tendencies in Poetry: A Computational Analysis of Gender-Themed Versus General-Themed Poetry by Cesare Pavese, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath" to understand the clues that let us foresee suicidal ideation in these three authors. I. M. Nick (Germanic Society for Forensic Linguistics) also employs this methodology in "Black and Blue: Revealing Suicidality in the Poetry of the Afro-German Writer-Activist, May Ayim" to bring to light the suicidal ideation in May Ayim through the analysis of the recurrent use of certain expressions and metaphors. Giuseppa Tamburello (University of Palermo) goes across the work of Haizi in "Words in Poetry: Early and Late Poems by Haizi" to conclude that the words he used in his poems reveal a peculiar vision of life in terms of discontinuity compatible with suicide. To finish, the last chapter of this part and also of the volume, "Being Suicidal After Birth: Recoveries of Brooke Shields in *Down Came the Rain*, Elif Şafak in *Siyah Süt* (*Black milk*), and Fuani Marino in *Svegliami a Mezzanotte* (*Wake Me Up in the Midnight*) from Ecolinguistic Perspectives," by Fazila Derya Agis (Independent Scholar), explores cultural reasons for the suicidal ideas of Shields, Şafak, and Marino, underlining the ecolinguistic metaphors used in their works and poses positive thinking about nature and arts as a therapy strategy that may help suicidal people recover from their negative mental states.

Some titles so far have focused on various aspects of suicide from a pedagogical approach to be applied in the classroom (Berman, 1999), on suicide in a specific period such as nineteenth-century (Bernardini & Virga, 2014) and twentieth-century Italian literature (Leake, 2011), East German literature (Blankenship, 2017), Israeli literature (Harris, 2014), Cuban literature (Pérez Jr., 2012), Chinese literature (Zamperini, 2001), or Russian literature (Paperno, 2018), on literature and euthanasia (Hakola & Kivistö, 2014), on suicide and gender (Jaworski, 2016) and ethnicity (Leach, 2014), in periods before contemporaneity (Lachman, 2008), or in only one literary work (Lerner, 2008). However, the analyses conducted by the contributors to this volume serve a different purpose: to find patterns (e.g., depending on gender, age, mental conditions, social system, time, place, religious beliefs, philosophical approaches to life, literary genre, writing style, etc.) that allow us to train our gaze when detecting suicidal ideation in current and future writers and in people whom we may want to make write literary, philosophical, or autobiographical texts after identifying or suspecting their vulnerable condition to better understand, support, and address it with a preventive projection in mind.

Only by talking about suicide can we prevent it from being the epidemic that kills so many people every year and the infinite pain of the survivors (children, parents, friends) who are left behind. Literature is perhaps the available resource against the ultimate act of self-sabotage that suicide entails, because the treatment

of suicide in literature can serve as a refuge and a window to more pleasant realities, but it can also vomit out the saddest and gloomiest feelings of the sufferer to make them visible to themselves and to those who have the chance to offer some support to them. In literature, Juana has the right to be named and remembered; she continues to exist, and her suffering is not invisible to us. When the last of those who knew Juana no longer remember her, she will continue to exist in this preface.

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Contents

Part I Suicide in Contemporary Writers Caused by Socio-Structural and Environmental Violence and Pressures

1 Beyond the Wertherian *Motif* of Suicide: The Unity of the Self in Karoline von Günderrode's Death 3
Julia Köwitz García

2 "I Manage It": Analyzing Tropes of Suicide in Sylvia Plath's Writing 13
Pooja Yadav

3 Virginia Woolf's Suicidal Character(s): Schizophrenia and the Rebellion Against the Body and the Self in Her Literary Works 25
Diego Carretero Román

4 "Death Beats in My Heart Everyday": A Sociological Reading of Suicidal Intent in Sara Shagufta's Works 41
Rashmi Joshi

5 Inside the Medical Suicidal Mind: Felipe Trigo's Death by Suicide and Its Self-Novelization as a Way of Understanding Suicide in Contemporary Practitioners 51
Andy Eric Castillo Patton

6 The Problem of Suicide in Kafka: An Ethical or Aesthetical Problem? 63
Fabio Bartoli

7 The Tragedy of Vladimir Mayakovsky: Suicide as a Dialectical Dilemma 75
Mary Elisabeth Elliott

8 Paul Celan: The Abyss of the Word "Forgiveness" 85
Fernando Gilabert Bello

9 "Lines of Flight": The Deterritorialization of Gilles Deleuze 97
Alison Parks

Part II Suicide in Contemporary Writers as an Expression of the Will, the Dislocation Between the Individual and the Reality, and Existential Alienation

10 The Ontological Suicide of Philipp Mainländer: A Search for Redemption Through Nothingness 109
Paolo Humberto Gajardo Jaña

11 Simone Weil, Martyr or Suicidal? Between Martyrdom and Suicide: The Question of the Meaning of Life and Death 121
Myriam Rodríguez del Real

12 The Fall of a Legend: Deleuze's Suicide and His Spinoza 129
María de las Mercedes López Mateo

13 Is Suicide a Choice? Suicide and *Sophie's Choice* in William Styron 139
Robyn Gaier

14 Mortality and Meaninglessness: Leo Tolstoy and Mickey Sachs Reconsidered 147
Morgan Rempel

15 Carlo Michelstaedter and the Philosophical Suicide 161
Juan Ignacio Iturraspe Staps

16 Two-Gun Bob on the Pyre: Robert E. Howard's Suicide in the Context of His Life and Work 173
Thomas Schwaiger

17 The Confusing Anxiety of Ryūnosuke Akutagawa 183
Ana Rodríguez Quetglas

18 Through the Mask. Behind Osamu Dazai's Smile 195
Andrea Marín Gil

19 The Catastrophe of the Self: The Case of Unica Zürn 203
Leonor Saro García

Part III Suicide in Contemporary Writers Understood Through Their Literary Styles, Their Writing Techniques, and Their Metaphorical Language

20 Sylvia Plath: Suicidal Tendencies in Life, Poems, and Fiction 215
David Lester

21 Dying Is an Art: Death in the Art of Sylvia Plath 229
Anindita Adhikari

22 One Wrist, Then the Other Wrist: The Mind Style of a Suicidal Protagonist as Portrayed in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* 239
Fionnula Simpson

23 Reflection of Suicidal Tendencies in Poetry: A Computational Analysis of Gender-Themed Versus General-Themed Poetry by Cesare Pavese, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath 249
Anna Carson

24 Black and Blue: Revealing Suicidality in the Poetry of the Afro-German Writer-Activist, May Ayim 261
I. M. Nick

25 Words in Poetry: Early and Late Poems by Haizi 279
Giuseppa Tamburello

26 Being Suicidal After Birth: Recoveries of Brooke Shields in *Down Came the Rain*, Elif Şafak in *Siyah Süt* (*Black Milk*), and Fuani Marino in *Svegliami a Mezzanotte* (*Wake Me Up in the Midnight*) from Ecolinguistic Perspectives 293
Fazila Derya Agis

Index 305

List of Figures

Fig. 23.1 Aaron Beck's Cognitive Model of Depression (Brown, 2013) . . . 251

Graph 24.1 Ayim's annual number of published poems between 1978 and 1996 268

Graph 24.2 (**a**,**b**) Number of words and lines contained in Ayim's poetry for 1985–1986 and 1995–1996 269

List of Tables

Table 23.1 Selected gender-themed poems written one year or less before suicide 254
Table 23.2 Selected gender-themed poems written more than one year before suicide 254
Table 23.3 Selected general-themed poems written one year or less before suicide 254
Table 23.4 Selected general-themed poems written more than one year before suicide. 254

Table 24.1 The LIWC variables with the largest degree of change between 1985–1986 and 1995–1996. 271
Table 24.2 Means, standard deviations, test coefficients, and p-values (of LIWC categories with statistical significance at 0.05) 271

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Part I
Suicide in Contemporary Writers Caused by Socio-Structural and Environmental Violence and Pressures

Chapter 1
Beyond the Wertherian *Motif* of Suicide: The Unity of the Self in Karoline von Günderrode's Death

Julia Köwitz García

This chapter attempts to examine and review the root causes of Karoline von Günderrode's suicide in 1806 through a thorough analysis of the society of her time, the prevailing gender roles in Europe, and her philosophical ideas, often framed by her longing to preserve the unity of the self. Her lyrical as well as autobiographical oeuvre (letters) will serve as support, together with recent research, for the arguments put forward. The chapter starts from the thesis—reworked from Christa Wolf's prolific studies—that, for Günderrode, death is the only way to preserve the unity of the self. This unity is the basis of her deepest identity. She cannot, must not, be fragmented for the sake of a sick society: her different identities must live together in harmony and, if necessary, must do so while resting on a deathbed, for ever and ever. This argument is nuanced and supported by two sections. The first one is a brief retrospective of the sociopolitical circumstances at the turn of the century in Europe and their corresponding impact on the patriarchal model, which some women dared to challenge, not without reprisals. The second part deals with the author's philosophical and mythological influences, which often shaped much of her inner thinking about death. Some of her poems and letters, from *Darthula nach Ossian* to *Ariadne auf Naxos*, are interpreted directly in this context. This is followed by a conclusion, whereby Günderrode's suicide should not be understood as a Wertherian manifestation but rather as the culmination of her philosophical thought.

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1 Historical and Sociopolitical Context

To understand the reasons and inner forces that led Karoline von Günderrode to voluntary death, I must first list a whole series of historical, political, social, and cultural circumstances that shaped the particular worldview of the fragmented and worn-out Holy Roman Empire during its last years of existence.

Toward the last two decades of the eighteenth century, the milestone of the French Revolution caused fervent enthusiasm among the educated layers of German society (*Bildungsbürgertum*), who saw in the event "the realization of reason [and] the establishment of human rights" (Kurz, 1989, p. 9). In the words of Friedrich von Gentz, the revolution "is the first practical triumph of philosophy, the first example of a form of government based on principles and a coherent system" (Kurz, 1989, p. 9). In reality, this basis of collective acceptance of the ideas of the French Revolution in Germany was facilitated to a great extent by a previous debate of a reformist nature, "in which human rights, freedom and equality as regulatory political principles, the separation of powers and the legitimacy of the government were discussed" (Kurz, 1989, p. 9). The role that the German intellectual majority assumed was, without a doubt, that of an enthusiastic spectator during the years prior to the Jacobin terror.

Instead of bloody revolutions, spectator Germany urged the princes to promote new reforms and maintain those already begun. An increasing number of reformists argued the disastrous consequences of a hypothetical revolution for which Germany—according to some intellectuals such as Franz Wilhelm Jung or Georg Forster—was not prepared:

> The situation in Germany, the nature of its people, the degree and peculiarity of their education, the mixture of constitutions and laws, in short, its physical, moral and political conditions, have reserved for it a slow gradual perfection and maturity. It must be made wise through the errors and sufferings of its neighbors, and perhaps, it is gradually allowed a freedom from above that others must snatch by force and immediately from below. (Kurz, 1989, pp. 30–31)

This quotation by Forster inevitably follows the almost feudal and medieval character of which much of the Holy Roman Empire was still composed, which nevertheless received, and increased avidly, the compendium of new revolutionary ideas and, with it, the colossal building of the new modern era. This being the case, how could all the forces involved not be linearly accumulated, twisted, attracted, and repelled according to their magnitudes and directions to, once mixed, find shelter in a few individuals who, in their own way, represented this new dialectic of the turn of the century? As far as this chapter is concerned, I will classify Karoline within this category. The poet suffered, like *Faust* in Goethe's literary fiction, a collapse between tradition and modernity. In this sense, Berman (1988) points out that it is "an epoch whose thought and sensibility are modern […] but whose material and social conditions are still medieval" (p. 39).

Christa Wolf (1984, p. 9) shares this vision about Günderrode and some of her contemporaries around 1800:

> The new bourgeois society, not yet fully developed and already in the process of falling into decadence, uses them as sketches, as projects, to relegate them almost immediately to oblivion […]. They arise thanks to the singularity of the moment, whose transience spreads to their lives in the form of pain.

Although the period between 1790 and 1815 in Germany was marked by a generalized contact of women with literature and unprecedented knowledge, their integration was far from being accepted by a large part of intellectuals, who saw in "the wise woman" a real threat (Hoock-Demarle, 2018). In fact, with few exceptions—among which are mainly daughters of important scholars—women were totally excluded from university education in the territories of the Holy Roman Empire. During the second half of the eighteenth century, men referred to the need for an educated bourgeois woman, but always subordinate to her inferior condition, which justifies the fact that, for example, women were to be educated by means of a particular genre that they agreed to classify under the label *Für Damen* or *Für das Frauenzimmer*. These same men reported that "women do not need concepts […], they need images. Women do not need causal explanations […], they need analogies" (Baasner, 2000, pp. 12–14). To this literature specially designed to educate women without "overlearning" is added the promotion of reading works of fiction, which follow the hegemonic norm, always associated with the female gender, of sticking only to what is beautiful, in aspects of both form and content. In this way, an imaginary space was strictly defined on which each individual woman should, regardless of her desires and inclinations, project herself, taking sufficient care not to exceed any of her limits, which we would have to frame within an "imagined femininity" by men (Baasner, 2000, p. 14). In fact, men are dedicated to the question of whether women equal men in intellect and debate extensively in this regard. For Rousseau, the intellectual faculty of a man is more complex than that of a woman, insofar as she has no other vital scenario than that of domestic life, which is innate to her by its very nature. In *Emilio* (Book V), Rousseau states the following: "The search for abstract and speculative truths, principles, axioms in the sciences, and everything that tends to generalize ideas is not within the compass of women: all their studies must deal with the practical" (Crampe-Casnabet, 1994, p. 329).

This being the general thinking of the time, it is not surprising that Karoline von Günderrode felt alien to the obligations and behaviors of her sex, which she often referred to as an incomprehensible agent. In a letter to Gunda Brentano sent in August 1801, Karoline acknowledges her closeness to "the masculine":

> I often have the unfeminine desire to launch myself into a fierce battle, to die: Why am I not a man? I am not made for feminine virtues, for the bland happiness of women. Only the wild, the great, the splendour appeals to me. There is an unfortunate but unalterable imbalance in my soul, and I will have to continue like this because I am a woman, my desires are manly, but I don't have a man's strength. That is why I am so fickle and indecisive. (Wolf, 1984, p. 7)

In fact, not only does she dare to publish *Gedichten und Fantasien* under the masculine pseudonym of "Tian," but in her philosophical system, she establishes the origins and primordial forces—an issue that occupied her entire production, as we

will see later—in the womb, based on the matriarchal models of Asia and the East, against the hegemonic and patriarchal conception of Greek mythology (Wolf, 1984).

It is a time in which *wild* and unclassifiable women are born within the specific obligations of their gender. Through the imaginary and almost infinite center of the correspondence, these unconventional women for the time begin an intense dialog with themselves, finally establishing themselves as independent subjects who try to understand themselves without any intermediary other than the self, rather than with their very identity. They are women to whom the bourgeois order of Germany without revolutions is unbearable because, simply, they do not fit in it: "My whole being yearns for a freedom that I will never find. I believe that love should be free, totally free from the bonds of the bourgeoisie," writes Lisette Nees von Esenbeck to Günderrode (Wolf, 1984, p. 30).

That is why many of them see marriage as the only available path: Raquel Varnhagen, thus, ensured her position within society in such a way that once she had assimilated it—at least partially—the writer continued her intellectual work without any external disapproval. It was also the fate of other women, such as the sisters Marianne and Sarah Maier, Dorothea Schlegel, Henriette Herz, and Rebecca Friedländer (Mahrdt, 2000).

Karoline, however, never got married nor did she seek anything other than "the truths of the spirit of the Earth": love, truth, and the Absolute. That is why marriage was neither her goal nor her method, nor did she want to achieve a high social position or recover the old noble status from which her late father came. Rather, Günderrode insisted on carving her own path and, like her friend Lisette, did not lack sharp criticism by the society of her time, which she collected in her work *An Eusebio*:

> I am often dissatisfied, and I do not know who I should be more dissatisfied with, myself or this time […] everything great and powerful has been distributed in an infinite mass, under which it almost disappears […] This misery of life, let us confess, has arisen with Protestantism […] Enough, then, of a swollen century […] Let us look back at the best days that have been. Perhaps we are now in a stage of education in which our highest and most dignified endeavor should be to understand the great masters of the art of the previous world and to fertilize our sparse lives with the richness and abundance of their poetic representations. […] we are closed to nature […] by narrower concepts, to any large-scale activity by our forms of government. (2006, pp. 351–352)

If the strict traditions, institutions, and forms of government of her time bind and hinder the effective realization of the most noble and universal aspirations of the human being, Karoline von Günderrode will not hesitate to find an alternative path in the ancient and great masters. It will be what in all eras has allowed the poets, writers, and intellectuals of their time to establish a bridge between a thriving past and a fragmented present, which they can no longer fully understand.

This position does not constitute, only, a very brave active resignation; it is also a form of will that aims to immerse itself openly in the dream of the past. The fascination for the past is, in fact, an almost intrinsic property of the Romantics: Novalis—whose work Günderrode read with great enthusiasm and

dedication—was a fervent defender of Christian Europe. He saw in her "a great mutual interest" that united men in a universal communion under Roman authority (Bravo de la Varga, 2010, p. 31).

2 Inspirations, Work, and Indications of Her Suicide

In this section, an analysis will be made of the indications and clues to the suicide of the author present in her literary work and epistolary exchange. For this, however, a prior synthesis of her thought is essential. Although it remained strongly linked to the philosophy of its time, from the beginning, the poet modeled her own path, groundbreaking and very courageous for the social context of her time.

Take, first, the evolution of Günderrode's thought as an *imaginary organism* in constant change, whose main characteristic, however, always consisted of the ongoing search for the "Absolute." The poet dedicated her entire existence to this idea, which she used as a reference system to which she gradually and partially added the thought of great contemporary intellectuals such as Novalis, Schelling, Fichte, and Hölderlin. The particular influence of each on the work of Günderrode results from a complexity and extension that goes beyond the objective of this research, which rather aims to clarify the motivations that underlie the voluntary death of the author through her work and autobiographical production.

Karoline found the permanent search for the Absolute, like many of her contemporaries, in a primitive state and prior to consciousness (Christmann, 2003). She considers this absolute organism to be eternal; she identifies it with the "all-time" (*Allzeit*) and with the will of nature itself. Günderrode (2006) states that "the immortality of life […] rises and falls in its members, the elements, and […] through dissolution (which we sometimes call death), it mixes with them according to laws of affinity" (p. 359). Especially notable is her particular interpretation of death as "dissolution" (*Auflösung*), whose components, the spiritual and the natural, depend on it to mutually contact each other. In fact, as stated by Nassar (2022), for Günderrode, "the earthly is a manifestation of the spiritual that allows us to realize moral ideals" (p. 123).

In this way, death serves as an agent of contact between two seemingly irreconcilable elements, which, however, are part of the same will: the earthly and the spiritual, the body or the "fragile vessel" and "the potion" of all-time (*Allzeit*).

Günderrode reveals the bases of this thought in *An Eusebio*, which consists of a fictitious epistolary exchange between two friends:

> Thus, every dying person returns to the Earth a higher and more developed elemental life […], and the organism, by taking into itself more and more developed elements, must thus become more and more perfect and general. Thus, the all-time (Allzeit) becomes alive through the disappearance of the individual, and the individual lives immortally in the all-time, whose life he developed vividly […], thus helping to realize the idea of the Earth through life and death. Thus, as much as my elements are dispersed, if they join what is already alive, they will make it bigger. (2006, p. 360)

The will of the Earth, therefore, is expressed through each individual, which makes the all-time (*Allzeit*) evolve to the extent that it houses it and fulfills its function as a "fragile vessel," whose culmination is carried out by means of death. In this sense, the speech given by the friend to Eusebio is especially enlightening: "Thus, no matter how much my elements are dispersed, if they join what is already alive, they will increase it; for those whose life still resembles death, they will animate it" (2006, p. 359).

Death constitutes, for Günderrode, a dispersion of its own elements in nature, not the end of everything. It allows the spirit of all-time to develop, increasingly more evolved, in each of the individuals. This conception is based—and thus explicitly stated in the work—on the "Indian idea of the transmigration of souls" (2006, p. 359).

The influence of Fichte is also clear. However, while this considers the mechanism of the will exclusively of the human being, whose acts obey a "free will" and not a "mechanism of nature," Günderrode "argues that nature as a whole expresses a will, that is, that all natural beings are self-directed in some way" (Nassar, 2022, p. 123). That is why Günderrode understands that the determination of an individual rests on the negation of their own individuality (Christmann, 2003), while each human being, separately, simultaneously constitutes the whole of the whole and therefore of nature.

To characterize the latter according to her own thirst for the Absolute, the poet takes up Schelling's amalgamation of his scientific-natural philosophical ideas, combining in a single synthesis her own, original, and very particular reworking of the matter. Maintaining the theory of the ideal elemental forces of repulsion and attraction, she contemplates their derivation on light and gravity. The first is a source of life, and the second is of death: without the connection between the two, Günderrode considers that matter is "inconceivable" (Christmann, 2003, pp. 114, 119).

Thus, *Allzeit*, matter, and the will of the Earth, among others, are synonymous with the same philosophical reflection. In reality, all of Karoline's intellectual efforts are focused on the knowledge of this mysterious invisible, which *Das Reich der Töne* describes as a "mysterious life" (*geheimnisvollen Leben*) that "dwells in all matter but is imprisoned in it." She wants to find any way, however small, to approach this "living spirit" that "hovered over matter […] when all things were still mixed in raw masses" (Günderrode, 2006, p. 441). The infallible and favorite method will be death, suicide, even if she had tried poetry before; the poet sees in death the determination of oneself, the way to preserve the unity, which, precisely, is reaffirmed by denying the own individuality. To shed light on this idea, the content of her work *Geschichte eines Braminen* is essential. In this particular "dual monologue" between a man and his apprentice, death appears as an agent of attraction between "the universality of the Creator with the individuality of the creature" (2006, p. 312): Almor, who tells the young apprentice about his experience, narrates how "a new circumstance […] suddenly opened the still unknown depths of [his] own mind […] The moral world, hitherto invisible to [him], was revealed [to him]; [he saw] a community of spirits […] a purpose of human effort" (2006, p. 304).

Once the character Almor discovers the suprasensible realm—the moral world that Günderrode takes up, adjusted to her own measure, from Fichte—he has no way of going back. Reality becomes incomplete, and he even recognizes that he was never part of it:

> I was never hers; it was, so to speak, only an agreement according to which she gave me the essentials of her goods, according to which I gave her what I could. This agreement has come to an end; she can no longer give me anything, her noise makes me deaf to the language of my own spirit, her circumstances confuse me, I would lose myself uselessly in her. Here, in this quiet solitude, I have found my originality, my peace, my God, and a thousand spiritual voices speak to me of revelations that I could not hear in the hustle and bustle of life. (2006, p. 307)

It is evident that the same thing happened to Günderrode. The key here is the identification of the individual with nature in all its elements. Regarding this Hindu influence, Günderrode (2006, p. 310) considers that each individual is sacred, as this constitutes, by itself, the most delicate affirmation of the Earth's own will:

> Each individual is sacred to me; it is the work of God, is his own end […] what belongs to the world belongs to us, our actions in it can be directed according to his law and according to his order.

In her poem *Darthula nach Ossian*, contained in her work *Gedichte und Phantasien*, Darthula decides to launch into battle in order not to have to live next to the enemy who desires her, Caibar. Indeed, each individual is "sacred" for Günderrode: it is the decision of a woman warrior who, traumatized by the loss of her world and her family, decides to launch into battle without caring about taking her own life (Allingham, 2014). There is, therefore, a strong parallel between work and life: Karoline von Günderrode, thus, reaffirms her right to be unique, declaring herself against the submission and obedience that are typical of the woman of her time. The society that surrounds it is represented by Caibar; she, an orphan and with loves that betray her—not only loves but also poets and intellectuals of her circle who do not take her seriously because she is a woman—is Darthula, a woman who has dared to assume the role, always reserved for men, of heroin. The death of the female heroine as salvation, with whom Karoline very often identified, is a recurring theme in her work. The decision to die, thus, becomes a reaffirmation of the suprasensible realm, which for Günderrode has its own place in poetry and literary production in general.

The signs of suicide present in her work are varied and diverse. In her first poems, through the experience of love, the poet sees in death the opportunity to realize the feeling of lovers that in earthly life has not been able to be attained. Thus, the *leitmotif* of *Liebestod* drifts into a higher state, which is nothing more than the realization of the will of the Earth that was already expounded in *An Eusebio*. In *Ariane auf Naxos*, the hurt Ariadne "does not doubt and is submerged in the floods/The pain of love will not be immortal!/[…] The wound of the heart likes to be wrapped in the night of the grave," (2006, p. 80) or in *Die Malabarischen Witwen*, the lyrical self reinforces the idea of death as a new beginning (2006, p. 325):

> No other separation threatens this union,
> Because the flames of love that were divided before
> In one of them they fervently beat together.

> Death becomes the sweet feast of love,
> Joins the separated elements,
> The summit of life becomes the end of existence.

In *Die Bande der Liebe*, the death of the loved one unites the lovers eternally (Christmann, 2003). Love "is the name of […] an eternal bond […] that has united the Erebian night, death with life" (Günderrode, 2006, p. 68). The poet refers to the new state reached after death as "a land where the dead speak with the living," in which she will have to experience longing to find her place with "the most sublime," as she explicitly refers to in a letter to Clemens Brentano:

> The desire to express my life in a lasting way remains pure and alive, in an appearance that is worthy of approaching the most sublime, of being at its height. Yes, this is the community to which I would like to belong; this is the church toward which my spirit, pilgrim on Earth, is directed. (Wolf, 1984, pp. 28–29)

Like Novalis, Karoline von Günderrode saw in the poetic and artistic process the correlation of the division of the Absolute. Hardenberg refers to the process as a reflection in the mirror, whose result only refers, ultimately, to an incomplete form of absolute identity, which is lost in the reflection (Christmann, 2003). From this conception follows the idea of Günderrode, who insists on the impossibility of returning to oneself as it was in the beginning (Christmann, 2003).

Although the individual is incapable of retracing their steps to an identical state, for Günderrode (2006, p. 311), "one lives three times"—once as an animal, once as a human, and, finally, once spiritually—and therefore will have to experience the last form in the apogee of its most forceful manifestation, as happens to Almor's teacher in *Geschichte eines Braminen*, who commits suicide once the suprasensible realm is discovered:

> "I have spent months and years in which the spirit was only silent, but suddenly, it spoke to me in high revelations; then, in an instant, things became understandable to me that for years I had struggled to understand in vain. The phenomena that surrounded me then had a new and completely different meaning; a fresh spring of life flowed through my chest; my thoughts flew bolder, faster […] However, when the voice was silent, when the window of heaven was closed, for which the divine clarity had entered my dark soul, then I felt very sad and could not rejoice more than the memory of the light that I had seen." A double life seemed to inhabit the old man when he spoke like this, and a spark of his spirit passed to mine. (Günderrode, 2006, p. 313)

Similarly, in a letter to Clemens Brentano, Günderrode states that she feels internally divided: "it seems to me (when I read what I wrote a long time ago) as if I saw myself lying in a coffin and my two selves were looking at each other in astonishment" (Wolf, 1984, p. 54).

See, then, the direct confirmation of the entry of the poet into the spiritual state of consciousness, making her a stranger to herself. The only method that must undo the painful split of her identity consists, precisely, of death: that is why Karoline follows the same steps as her character, choosing suicide. If the real world no longer satisfies the needs of the one who has experienced the division of their identity and therefore the most direct manifestation of the will of their spirit, then only death remains, the voluntary resignation to continue being a human being. According to

the present research, this should be described as the culminating manifestation of two forces, whose directions, despite being opposite, contribute in equal measure to the very definition of the concept. The first follows a trajectory that dilutes the human being in the whole of nature and, therefore, returns to the Earth. This contribution has to be applied on a large scale, that is, on nature as a whole. The second, however, acts as a binding agent, as it reverses the division of identity that an individual suffers once they discover the voice of their own spirit. Its point of application is also different because it is found in the individual themself. It is precisely the difference in the scale to which each action makes its contribution that allows us to affirm that the sum of both actions or suicidal forces leads to the preservation of the unity of the individual or, similarly, of the Earth.

Hence, the title of this chapter, Günderrode's suicide, goes beyond the explanation of loving nature—in the end, Wertherian—that took place in the last century. In fact, the in-depth study of her work suggests the opposite: the life of Karoline von Günderrode often took place much more in the field of literature than in the ordinary world, always building on the very foundation of her philosophical thought.

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Chapter 2
"I Manage It": Analyzing Tropes of Suicide in Sylvia Plath's Writing

Pooja Yadav

Deconstructing the field of women's writing in the contemporary era cannot be done without the broader framework of intersectional studies. Understanding tropes and clues from Sylvia Plath's writing, namely, through her poems such as *Lady Lazurus* and *Daddy* as well as her only novel, *The Bell Jar*, helps one map her own struggle with mental illness, which resulted in her suicide at the age of 30. In this chapter, I argue that patriarchal paradigms on gender and womanhood dictated the personal and the political, which is reflected in Plath's writing. I underline these issues of conflict, identity, and gender through her work which becomes a site to explore one's own place in society *vis-à-vis* external labels and categories assigned by society on women, as mothers, daughters, and wives. Plath's work may be read as an attempt at reconciliation between her many struggles and identities. Reading her work today offers a focal lens into the lives of women, not only of that time, but also of today, where the publishing industry continues to be dominated by men, who are never called "male writers," as women often are seen as only "female writers." Plath's writing became an "attempt at managing" her thoughts of suicide. It is interesting to note how writing becomes resistance to suicide, by literally and metaphorically inscribing "life," and can be read as a psychological assertion of their "self," "id," and "ego."

Over the past two years, COVID-19 emerged as a painful pandemic that exacerbated existing issues of inequality, conflict, and isolation. Overtime, experts have argued that "[s]uicide mortality and coronavirus disease 2019 [make] a perfect storm" (Reger et al., 2020, p. 1093), highlighting the increasing need to study suicide in the contemporary era. Analyzing suicide(s) cannot be conducted in a vacuum, they must be examined under intersections of gender, class, race, and language. Understanding links between gender and psychological issues, as well as class under the framework of literature, helps delineate themes of hopelessness, identity, and patriarchy.

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Before delving into Sylvia Plath's only novel, *The Bell Jar* (published in 1943), and two of her seminal poems, one must (re)locate her writing both inside and outside the genre of women's writing. Can Plath's work be classified only under a singular genre, or does it simultaneously permeate into modernist writing, psychological studies, as well as American literature? Beginning with the field of women's writing, one is compelled to critically gauge her position as a white woman, writing at a time when colonialism and racism perpetuated hegemonic modes of writing and power. Therefore, classifying Plath's work monolithically as an expression of "writing as resistance" (Olson, 2010, p. 171) does not do justice to the range of her writing, arguably moving to and from the center to the margins in a dialectical process.

Often, in literary discourses, Plath's identity has been defined narrowly in terms of her marriage to Ted Hughes, or as a tragic writer, who found early recognition in America and committed suicide in London. In a form of writing where the political and the personal intertwine, can one argue that Plath's trajectory represents a failure of the American Dream? Or does it deconstruct the very idea of capitalist society, which in the guise of "development" and "freedom" leaves women with little or no agency, forcing women who do not "fit in" gender roles to commit suicide? Can suicide be read as an assertion of the self? How does Plath's writing help charter the inner psyche of her voice as a writer and as a woman? This chapter focuses on a literary mapping of Plath's numerous references to death, acting as a framework to navigate her life and writing, offering a sense of direction to her journeys across continents, genres of writing, and even time.

This also raises the question of reading "The death of the author" (Barthes, 1977) through an alternative viewpoint. Can one argue that it is Plath's act of committing suicide that grants her literary canonicity, cementing her position as a modernist writer, moving away from Barthes criticism from reading too much into the author's intentions? Or does one attempt to reframe a critical analysis centering an interdisciplinary approach to shedding greater light on the nuances of Plath's writing, referencing the death of her work and life, which acts as a testimony to her exploration of one's own place in society *vis-à-vis* external labels and categories assigned by society on women, as mothers, daughters, and wives? Plath's work may be read as an attempt at reconciliation between her many struggles and identities. Reading her work today offers a focal lens into the lives of women, not only of that time, but also of today, where the publishing industry continues to be dominated by men, who are never defined only by their gender, unlike women. In light of recent events such as the gendered vitriol attack on the Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin for a simple act of partying with her friends going viral across the globe on social media, one must continue to ask questions on women's agency, identity, and representation. Connecting such ideas to Plath's various expressions of "managing it" point to the relevance of studying suicide and literature as interlinked methodologies. It is interesting to note how writing becomes resistance to suicide by literally and metaphorically inscribing "life" and can be read as a psychological assertion of their "self," "id," and "ego."

The Bell Jar opens with a foreboding sentence:

> It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York. I'm stupid about executions. The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick, and that's all there was to read about in the papers--goggle-eyed headlines staring up at me on every street corner and at the fusty, peanut-smelling mouth of every subway. It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being bummed alive all along your nerves. (Plath, 2005, p. 1)

The real-life references to the case of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg and Plath's own experience with electrocution therapy cannot be overlooked here. The underlying emotion of feeling the essence of dying is a recurring refrain across her writing. Plath's autobiographical elements in the novel are apparent, and it became widely known after her death that she had not wanted the novel to be published in America, even though she had employed a pseudonym while publishing in the UK.

Born in 1932 to immigrant parents, a university professor father and high school teacher mother, Sylvia attained literary recognition from a young age. At 8 years old in 1940, she had her first poem published but tragically faced the loss of her father after his death due to diabetes. Sylvia's life seemed to gain momentum as she excelled in her studies and went on to garner further literary achievements. She went on to study at Smith College, where she graduated *summa cum laude* in 1955. Keeping up with her fervor for academics, she moved to Cambridge on a Fulbright scholarship. In 1956, she happened to attend a party where she encountered Ted Hughes, who too was a poet. They married a few months later and separated in 1962. She moved to an apartment in London, where she would write most of the poems that would be published posthumously as *Ariel* by Hughes (see also Chap. 20 in this book).

Questions of publication, theme, and agency surround much of Plath's work. *The Bell Jar* was published under her real name only after her death, and the poetry collection *Ariel* was edited by Hughes. Even after death, Plath's work and identity become circumscribed within routes defined by patriarchal influences, which evidently oppressed her and ironically continued to dictate her written word after her death. Claire Raymond, in her book *The Posthumous Voice in Women's Writing from Mary Shelley to Sylvia Plath*, explains the complications of understanding similar issues:

> My understanding of the trope of the posthumous voice concerns a narrator's claim to speak from death as from a disembodied space, a disturbance of topos. The trope of the posthumous voice takes prosopopeia, a given patriarchal technique of rhetoric, and reverses it: here, the living do not conjure the dead to speak; rather, the dead speaker conjures the living into audience. From a trauma metaphorized as an unending posthumousness, the disembodied posthumous voice creates a feminine speaker who has surpassed a history of trauma, but not, as Plath's Lady Lazarus undoes her martyrdom, by bringing the corpse back to life. Rather, the disembodied posthumous voice places in text a linguistic rebuttal of the feminine speaker's interdiction without revivifying the figurative narrator. The energy of the posthumous voice adheres to a rejection of the domestic scene of the corpse, the corpse as the edge of domesticity. The troped posthumous voice asserts itself uncannily after the implied disappearance of the corpse, after the last paraphernalia of domestic life has been put away. (2016, p. 10)

Considering such arguments, where does one place the protagonist, Esther Greenwood or even Plath in a larger framework of trauma *vis-à-vis* women's writing? Esther's journey into New York City and her inability to relate to the models of womanhood and femininity offered by her peers and society places her at odds with the life delineated by twentieth-century models on gender. The novel on the surface may seem as an attempt at a *Kunstlerroman*, weaving a narrative based on the growth of an artist, but a closer reading marks expressions of Plath's psyche which are haunted by references to death all around her. Initial references to death and violence begin with descriptions of loss of animal life, entering upon her friend Doreen's boyfriend's house, Plath writes:

> Instead of pictures hung up on the walls, he had antlers and buffalo horns and a stuffed rabbit head. Lenny jutted a thumb at the meek little gray muzzle and stiff jackrabbit ears. "Ran over that in Las Vegas." He walked away across the room, his cowboy boots echoing like pistol shots. (2005, p. 59)

This leaves Esther feeling uneasy, and she relates the entire atmosphere of the house as "depressing" and uses the oxymoron that her drink tasted more and more like dead water (Plath, 2005, p. 62). The motif of death follows Esther's presence both inside and outside rooms and her mind. After a joyless travel around New York and the parties as well as the people it offers, she thinks to herself:

> Whenever I'm sad I'm going to die, or so nervous I can't sleep, or in love with somebody I won't be seeing for a week, I slump down just so far and then I say: "I'll go take a hot bath." (Plath, 2005, p. 71)

This acts as a cross-reference to a later instance when Esther requests Teresa, the family doctor who also happens to be an aunt's sister-in-law, for more sleeping pills. Teresa replies that the ones she gave her last week were very strong, to which Esther replies, they no longer work on her (Plath, 2005).

Halfway through the novel, the reader has witnessed several episodes of violence committed upon Esther. In New York, she is sexually assaulted by a man named Marco, on a blind date, leaving her shaken. One is able to feel Esther's inner conflict when she contemplates a conventional domesticated married life with her college boyfriend, Buddy Willard, who is recovering from tuberculosis and wishes to marry her. In the eyes of society, Buddy seems like a "catch," but Esther's astute observations of his inability to treat her like an equal help her unmask his hypocrisy once he admits to having an affair with a waitress.

As the narrative moves forward, the reader sees that Esther's mental capabilities are now failing her. When she moves back to Boston, she discovers she has not been accepted to a writing class she had applied for and, therefore, will be forced to spend her summer with her mother. She creates a list of things she will do during this time, but soon the world around her begins to disintegrate, leaving her feeling hopeless. She is unable to cope with daily activities and eventually stops bathing. Her mother consults a psychiatrist, Dr. Gordon, whose clinic appears to be safe. Esther realizes that this is because there are "no windows" (Plath, 2005, p. 318). This bell jar-like enclosed existence temporarily appeals to Esther as a safety net. However, soon Dr. Gordon reports that her condition is not improving and prescribes electric shock

therapy for her. The scene is described vividly, capturing Esther's visceral rejection of the seemingly harmless treatment, being conducted for her own "good":

> A vague, medicinal stench emanated from her flesh. "Don't worry," the nurse grinned down at me. "Their first time everybody's scared to death." I tried to smile, but my skin had gone stiff, like parchment. Doctor Gordon was fitting two metal plates on either side of my head. He buckled them into place with a strap that dented my forehead and gave me a wire to bite. "There was a brief silence, like an indrawn breath. Then something bent down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the world." (Plath, 2005, pp. 356–357)

Esther becomes more troubled than ever after the traumatic treatment and decides to kill herself. She attempts to slit her wrists but can only bring herself to slash her calf. Plath's monologue articulating the inner mind of a person contemplating suicide is poignant and sensitive:

> But when it came right down to it, the skin of my wrist looked so white and defenseless that I couldn't do it. It was as if what I wanted to kill wasn't in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb, but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get at. It would take two motions. One wrist, then the other wrist. Three motions, if you counted changing the razor from hand to hand. Then I would step into the tub and lie down. I moved in front of the medicine cabinet. If I looked in the mirror while I did it, it would be like watching somebody else, in a book or a play. But the person in the mirror was paralyzed and too stupid to do a thing. (Plath, 2005, pp. 366–367)

Through Esther, Plath shows the reader that the binaries between what is considered "mad" and "normal" are blurred. There is no simple reasoning for Esther's state or choice to commit suicide. Overtime, her mother is constantly questioned by doctors who thought she had done something wrong because they asked her a lot of questions about her toilet training, whereas Esther had been perfectly trained at a very early age and given her no trouble whatsoever (Plath, 2005). Esther's commonsensical and straightforward voice in such instances dominates the narrative, highlighting the many nuances of mental disorders.

Plath's multifaceted portrayal of Esther as a brilliant scholar, unconventional woman, and critical thinker refigures the contemporary understanding of mental health and agency. At home, before her treatment, Esther reads newspaper articles about an attempted suicide. She thinks to herself:

> The inky-black newspaper paragraph didn't tell why Mr. Pollucci was on the ledge, or what Sgt. Kilmartin did to him when he finally got him in through the window. The trouble about jumping was that if you didn't pick the right number of stories, you might still be alive when you hit bottom. I thought seven stories must be a safe distance. (Plath, 2005, p. 341)

Once again, Esther's logical reasoning is applied to the process of committing suicide, marking it as a planned and rational action. The continual cross-referencing to other's suicides creates a network of historiography, wherein Plath attempts to inscribe the lives of those who died, or tried doing so, onto paper.

One may also argue that writing for Plath, therefore, is a testament to the struggle of living. Literature, or here, Plath's poetry becomes a site to examine questions of identity, suicide, and mental illnesses. Plath's work also raises the question: does writing become a form of resistance against the patriarchal paradigms on gender and womanhood dictated by the personal and the political, or does it become a form of

resistance to life and the act of living? Does poetry, in Plath's case, become a testament to the struggle of living or even the struggle to die? Therefore, Plath's conflicted voice becomes almost a philosophical mediation on themes of humanism, human consciousness, and existentialism. Her work can arguably be labeled as self-reflective, where writing takes on a form of questioning the self. It is important to keep in mind that attempting to understand Plath's suicide, not only as a literary theme or her desire to end her life, which recurs in her writing, but also critically analyze the sociological and psychological conditions that prefaced the end of her life.

In a fateful statement in the novel, she writes: "In spite of my mother's guarded tongue, they would persuade her to put me into an asylum where I could be cured. Only my case was incurable" (Plath, 2005, p. 395). Esther too appears to be self-reflexive, she mentions:

> I had bought a few paperbacks on abnormal psychology at the drugstore and compared my symptoms with the symptoms in the books, and sure enough, my symptoms tallied with the most hopeless cases. The only thing I could read, besides the scandal sheets, were those abnormal-psychology books. It was as if some slim opening had been left, so I could learn all I needed to know about my case to end it in the proper way. (Plath, 2005, p. 394)

One is able to see the clarity with which Plath unveils society's double standards on mental illnesses and the binaries between what constitutes "normal" versus "abnormal." Plath's close examination of mental illnesses reveals the dehumanizing treatment meted out to any person who breaks societal norms, especially as a woman. Toward the end of the novel, Esther considers going into the Catholic Church herself. She is aware that Catholics think killing yourself is an awful sin. But she believes, if this is so, they might have a good way to persuade her out of it (Plath, 2005). Esther gains a yearning to visit her father's grave, which can be read as an attempt to reconcile her fragmented relationships with herself, ruptured due to the overarching patriarchal lens of society. Eventually, there is a ray of hope that emerges after her last treatment. She says: "All the heat and fear had purged itself. I felt surprisingly at peace. The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air" (Plath, 2005, p. 522). The feeling of freedom and the visibility of a transparent bell jar that has dedicated her life finally grants Esther the clarity she had been seeking. The bell jar represents many things at once, mental illness, the confinement of society and the clinic, and the limitations women face (see Chap. 22 in this book).

Literary critics have often made inevitable comparative analyses between Plath and Virginia Woolf due to numerous reasons (see Chap. 3 in this book). Both women used the confessional form of writing with feminist themes and sadly committed suicide. The two did not ever meet, but Woolf's work is known to have influenced Plath. In *The Bell Jar,* Esther is happy to have her "own room once again" (Plath, 2005, p. 455). In her seminal essay, "A Room of One's Own," Woolf focuses on the importance of locating models for women writers at a time when many women were forced to emulate or admire men who were writers. Woolf differentiates between female and male forms of talent, their strengths and weaknesses, and their varied interests and concerns and asks that women muster the courage to be true to themselves and their sex. Woolf writes: "It is much more important to be oneself than to be anything else" (1929, p. 111).

Jessica Dunn (2016, p. 1), in her theses *Unearthing Real Women: Reclaiming Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf from Their Suicide Narratives*, makes an important observation:

> It is not uncommon for writers to look to their predecessors for insight and inspiration. For women writers, whose foremothers have been few, that search is more complicated. Woolf herself made a concerted effort to locate her own literary foremothers, looking particularly to George Eliot. In her essay on this literary relationship, Alison Booth writes, "We see how Woolf devised a biographical reading of her predecessor that offered a possible reconciliation of the woman who suffers with the mind that creates, thus freeing herself to think back through Eliot" (Booth 95). If it is true, as Woolf says, that "a woman writing thinks back through her mothers," then Woolf, in appropriating Eliot, is seeking a relationship to Eliot much like a daughter seeks direction and guidance from her mother (Room 97). Decades later, we see Plath doing something similar with Woolf herself.

In this manner, is women's writing condemned to a linear understanding based on suicide? Dunn adds:

> While Plath was able to move past Woolf's suicide to draw upon other more exemplary elements of Woolf's life, many popular representations of these women's lives and even some literary viewpoints today do not look much beyond Woolf's and Plath's suicides. The tendency to fixate on the female suicide has affected how many women writers are remembered within and outside of academia. (2016, p. 2)

Yet, it is equally important to interrogate questions that surround the continued stigmatization of society even today. Tracing Plath's literary timeline of referencing her suicide attempts marks her as an author who was not afraid to write freely of her life. Her poetry captures her complex portrayal of emotions in vivid detail. Her poem *Daddy*, appearing in *Ariel* (1966), is as follows:

> You do not do, you do not do
> Any more, black shoe
> In which I have lived like a foot
> For thirty years, poor and white,
> Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.
>
> Daddy, I have had to kill you.
> You died before I had time——
> Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
> Ghastly statue with one gray toe
> Big as a Frisco seal
>
> And a head in the freakish Atlantic
> Where it pours bean green over blue
> In the waters off beautiful Nauset.
> I used to pray to recover you.
> Ach, du.
>
> In the German tongue, in the Polish town
> Scraped flat by the roller
> Of wars, wars, wars.
> But the name of the town is common.
> My Polack friend
>
> Says there are a dozen or two.
> So I never could tell where you
> Put your foot, your root,

I never could talk to you.
The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.
Ich, ich, ich, ich,
I could hardly speak.
I thought every German was you.
And the language obscene

I have always been scared of *you,*
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
And your neat mustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You——

Not God but a swastika
So black no sky could squeak through.
Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you.

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,
In the picture I have of you,
A cleft in your chin instead of your foot
But no less a devil for that, no not
Any less the black man who

Bit my pretty red heart in two.
I was ten when they buried you.
At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back, back to you.
I thought even the bones would do.

But they pulled me out of the sack,
And they stuck me together with glue.
And then I knew what to do.
I made a model of you,
A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.
And I said I do, I do.
So daddy, I'm finally through.
The black telephone's off at the root,
The voices just can't worm through.

If I've killed one man, I've killed two——
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.
Daddy, you can lie back now.

There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always *knew* it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.

The description of Plath's painful relationship with her father is a recurrent theme in the poem. One can also see the form of poetry as a site of resistance where Plath articulates her own agency and assertion through powerful words, seeking freedom from not only her father but also patriarchy at large. One may also note that *Daddy* was written on October 12, 1962, a month after Plath had separated from Hughes. The poem expresses Plath's literal and psychological pain through these verses, using references to Nazi Germany and the Second World War. Her father is compared to a black shoe, a bag full of God, a cold marble statue, a Nazi, a fascist, a sadistic brute, and a vampire. In some moments, the poet seems to be afraid of her father, but by the end, she has appeared triumphant and "through" with father figures who represent patriarchy. Her "attempt to die at 22" does not go unnoticed by the reader and akin to the tone used in *The Bell Jar* to state an attempt at suicide matter-of-factly.

Critics have problematized Plath's use of Nazi references, which cannot be overlooked. One may even say that no other vocabulary is available to her in the context of being a post-World War writer. *Daddy* is full of disturbing imagery and reads as a painful expression of a violent history of the world. Her other seminal poem *Lady Lazarus* (1966) exemplifies themes of patriarchal oppression, again using references to Holocaust imagery to articulate trauma and suffering:

I have done it again.
One year in every ten
I manage it—
A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot
A paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew linen.
Peel off the napkin
O my enemy.
Do I terrify?—
The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
The sour breath
Will vanish in a day.
Soon, soon the flesh
The grave cave ate will be
At home on me
And I a smiling woman.
I am only thirty.
And like the cat I have nine times to die.
This is Number Three.
What a trash
To annihilate each decade.
What a million filaments.
The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see
Them unwrap me hand and foot—
The big strip tease.
Gentlemen, ladies

These are my hands
My knees.
I may be skin and bone,
Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.
The first time it happened I was ten.
It was an accident.
The second time I meant
To last it out and not come back at all.
I rocked shut
As a seashell.
They had to call and call
And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.
Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.
I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I've a call.
It's easy enough to do it in a cell.
It's easy enough to do it and stay put.
It's the theatrical
Comeback in broad day
To the same place, the same face, the same brute
Amused shout:
'A miracle!'
That knocks me out.
There is a charge
For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
For the hearing of my heart—
It really goes.
And there is a charge, a very large charge
For a word or a touch
Or a bit of blood
Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.
So, so, Herr Doktor.
So, Herr Enemy.
I am your opus,
I am your valuable,
The pure gold baby
That melts to a shriek.
I turn and burn.
Do not think I underestimate your great concern.
Ash, ash—
You poke and stir.
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there--
A cake of soap,
A wedding ring,
A gold filling.
Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.
Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.

Lady Lazarus opens with the central theme of suicidal thoughts and death. Plath timestamps her attempts to kill herself once every ten years. The first time is described as an accident. But the second time, she was determined to accomplish her goal of self-destruction. This grants us an insight into the psychological distress that Plath has visibly been experiencing throughout her life. Suicide for her seems to be a regular goal and not anything out of the ordinary. The "regularity" of wanting to commit suicide as a response to life can be read in parallel to *The Bell Jar.*

The poet states that if she is saved, she will rise like a phoenix and devour men like air. The title is a reference to the Biblical figure of Lazarus. Plath does not find hope in Lazarus' resurrection but rather identifies with Lazarus dying in the tomb. To add to the painful imager, Plath insensitively uses references to the Holocaust by comparing her skin to a "Nazi lampshade." This is significant because of the idea that the Nazi people used the skin of the Jews to make lampshades. Plath uses this horrifying metaphor to compare her own suffering to those in Nazi concentration camps. This may also be read as a critique of Plath's writing as she compares her suffering to the Jewish people, which marks it as insensitive and unjustified. Plath's reference to the "fine Jew linen" heightens the feeling that she already feels dead.

Overall, Plath's writing remains a powerful voice in articulating feminist concerns of agency and freedom for women. Her continual references to patriarchal society and expression of resistance to it is an important poetic mediation to understand themes of trauma, mental well-being, and suicide. Though, on one hand, Plath's use of the Holocaust as a metaphor to measure her pain may be deemed insensitive by some, it remains a testament to her writing style and powerful oeuvre, reflected in her position in the literary canon. One may also state that the references to the Holocaust capture her own mental state, where Plath is unable to reconcile her writing with the act of living. Plath's writing continues to resonate with people, especially women and marginalized people groups as it draws upon the margins in literature to reframe questions of identity and gender. Her writing is both a dialectical act of "managing" life and suicide and mapping the process of management onto paper. Plath's work, therefore, functions as a historiographical space, where her attempts to commit suicide and lived reality are inscribed in personalized history.

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Chapter 3
Virginia Woolf's Suicidal Character(s): Schizophrenia and the Rebellion Against the Body and the Self in Her Literary Works

Diego Carretero Román

Virginia Woolf's suicide in 1941, together with the different written "residuals" she left, has generated multiple comparisons between herself and character and her literary works. Recent approaches, instead of seeing her suicide irrevocably as a direct consequence of her madness, tend to view it as a rational and deliberated act against an imposed psychiatric treatment that isolated her and prevented her from ruling over her own self. The following chapter departs from a medical humanities (MH) approach and examines, first, suicidal thoughts and conducts in Woolf's fiction and compares them to her own suicide, instead of analyzing first her suicide and inducting then the conclusions into the literary analysis. Woolf's works include numerous reflections on being, the self, and death, apart from two main suicidal characters—namely, Rhoda, in *The Waves*, and Septimus, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, whose suicide implies not only the failure of psychiatric institutions but also their agency. Understanding their death and suicide through the examination of their life, existence, and identity from a philosophical and sociological perspective may help fight the stigmatization of suicide as unreasonable, incomprehensible, and unsayable and shift towards a more comprehensive and empathetic view of suicide. While Woolf's suicide has been analyzed from different perspectives which aim to inspire useful psychiatric interventions, mostly, psychobiography, MH aim rather to explain and provide insight into suicide and even locate suicide prevention mainly outside psychiatry, as it does not alter or fight social conditions or structures that provoke mental diseases. Traditionally, it has been quite the opposite.

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1 Introduction

Contemporary approaches to suicide have stepped outside the domain of medicine and psychiatry and, in the last few decades, have analyzed it from an interdisciplinary perspective. Sociology, especially during the 1960s, marked the shift towards a new paradigm in examining the etiology of suicidal character rather than the act of suicide itself. Psychiatry has traditionally been concerned with suicide's ultimate factors and motivations and has, therefore, located suicide prevention within this last stage. However, influenced by such sociological and partly anti-psychiatry theories, there has also been a move towards community based, which has allowed humanities to be called into action within the scientific and medical realm. Fittingly, medical humanities (MH) have been concerned with different disciplines and fields, including narrative medicine, cultural studies, medical anthropology, ethics, and philosophy. However, not much attention has been brought to psychiatry: their main interest has been on the psychological impact of physical diseases. Thus, lacunae appear in researching mental illness—in and by itself—within the field of MH. While they do thematize the impact of physiological diseases on mental health—partly due to the sometimes-dehumanizing medical attention users receive—there is little criticism on the psychiatric institution and its practices.

Within the study of suicide from an MH perspective, attention to Virginia Woolf's case is brought up for both her case and fiction. One of her major works, *Mrs. Dalloway*, addresses *mental* illness and suicide directly through the character of Septimus. In *The Waves*—with Rhoda being the only other character that commits suicide in her fiction—the approach to mental sanity and insanity is much more subtle and complex, operating through a network of strategies and mechanisms which sociologists Michel Foucault and Achille Mbembé identified as biopower and necropower, respectively. As for Virginia Woolf herself, a great body of literature has been written analyzing her mental condition and eventual suicide through her diaries and letters. While recent literary criticism of her works has indeed included a more sociological perspective, little space has been given to sociological or gender perspectives in biographical accounts of her life. The questioning of the psychiatric institution in *Mrs. Dalloway* through Septimus' case points not only to the later anti-psychiatry movement but also to a correlation between gender and mental disorder. The politization of the personal experience of characters like Septimus is what this chapter incorporates into its approaching Virginia Woolf's own life and suicide.

The 1960s saw, with the birth of anti-psychiatry, an organized, academic response to psychiatry and its traditional role of social control and regulation. Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* was first published in 1961, defining madness as the irrational, the "antithesis" of rationality (Busfield, 1996, p. 73)—a culturally constructed category, a strategy of the larger social regulation that Foucault defines as "biopower" (1978, p. 141). On the same line, Deleuze and Guattari state in their *Anti-Oedipus* that "to be mad is not necessarily to be ill, notwithstanding that in our culture the two categories have become confused" (1983, p. 131, see Chaps. 9 and

12 in this book). In identifying historical uses of the term "madness," Joan Busfield differentiates three "terrains" in which madness "falls between: physical illness, deviance,[1] and normality" (1996, p. 56). Their boundaries, she continues, have been drawn ideologically, a point she illustrates looking at the progression of child abuse, which went "from the normal to the unacceptable to the disturbed" (Busfield, 1996, p. 57). British 1960s anti-psychiatrist R. D. Laing also questioned social conceptions of sanity and insanity, reducing them to a matter of "adjustment and conformity to social norms" (Busfield, 1996, p. 66). On the same line, Parsons links deviance with incapacity or unwillingness to perform imposed social roles and tasks (Busfield, 1996). Finally, Phyllis Chesler introduced gender into the discussion of the industry of mental sanity, emphasizing the patriarchal need "for women to be compliant and subordinate" (Busfield, 1996, p. 74). Certainly, since psychiatry's "golden age" in "the second half of the nineteenth century" (Castel, quoted in Busfield, 1996, p. 55), madness has acquired—and lost—many names. Such is the case of "shell-shock," with which Septimus is diagnosed in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

2 *Mrs. Dalloway*: Constructing and Conceptualizing Madness

Mrs. Dalloway thematizes that conflictive boundary between rationality and madness, as well as the problematic role of psychiatrists in their treatment of the suicidal veteran soldier Septimus Warren Smith. The novel points to sociopolitical circumstances—like the omnipresence of war, or gender regulation—that connect him with the protagonist, Clarissa Dalloway. It points to that originally feminist premise that "the personal is political," which applies to both femininity and masculinity standards. The lack of adjustment to those standards—deviance, in Busfield (1996) terms—has different implications for each gender. Different diagnoses and terminology are used for the same pathologies to differentiate not only their etiology but also, and especially, their gender. Consequently, gender discrepancy appears in the conceptualization and diagnosis of mental disorders. Adding an MH approach to literary criticism means, necessarily, to use an updated, relevant terminology that fits within the scientific field and studies of suicide. With that purpose, in this section, through the analysis of *Mrs. Dalloway*, this chapter examines the ideological implications of the different terms used for each gender.

The term "shell-shock" referred to the neurosis of soldiers returning from the First World War. The term "was introduced by a British doctor" in 1915 to describe "a nervous disorder in soldiers who had been at the front line" which closely resembled "cases of hysteria" (Busfield, 1996, p. 214). In 1917, it was noted that "shell-shock involves no new symptoms or disorders" and that "the term war neuroses" included "both hysteria and anxiety states" (Busfield, 1996, p. 215). With a

[1] She identifies two types of deviance: "madness and badness" (1996, p. 54).

symptomatology traditionally associated with a *natural* behavior in women, the term emerged from the patriarchal need for a masculine alternative that differentiated such disorder from "female" disorders like hysteria. Even if the own category of mental disorder traditionally belonged to womanhood, and some institutions refused to accept it,[2] the concept fitted in well for two main reasons. Firstly, it solved the problematics of defining veterans as "cowards, […] which would have threatened notions of masculinity" (Busfield, 1996, p. 218). Secondly, it "suggested a clear physical source for the problem" (Busfield, 1996, p. 219), which in fact did not always exist, as some soldiers were reported to suffer from it without direct proximity to explosions. For Busfield, it was, rather, the "inactivity," the "uncertainty," and the overall feeling of "powerlessness and lack of control" which triggered the breakdowns (1996, p. 218). Still, none of these explanations reflects Septimus' case.

Septimus mental condition is not rooted in a physical trauma: his pathology is that of *exaggerated* masculinity. His masculine abnegation of emotions and inability to grieve Evans' death initiates his mental malfunctioning:

> he developed manliness; he was promoted […] when Evans was killed, just before the Armistice, in Italy, Septimus, far from showing any emotion or recognising that here was the end of a friendship, congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably. The War had taught him. (Woolf, 1925, p. 130)

Initially, psychiatry—Dr. Holmes—seems unable to recognize a mental pathology in a "brave" man like Septimus, who had "fought" in the Great War, despite his desire to kill himself (Woolf, 1925, p. 213). Military service was, and still is, "strongly linked to notions of masculinity" (Busfield, 1996, p. 212), and hence opposed such suicidal irrationalities. Against the stigma of mental disorders, Septimus "could reason; […] his brain was perfect" (Woolf, 1925, p. 133), which leads to that initial diagnosis: "there was nothing whatever the matter with him" (Woolf, 1925, p. 130). This worsens his mental state with a sense of guilt: "there was no excuse; nothing whatever the matter, except the sin for which human nature had condemned him to death; that he did not feel. He had not cared when Evans was killed; that was worst" (Woolf, 1925, p. 137). His gender and the similarity of the symptoms with shell-shock trauma—mainly, "disturbances of vision" (Busfield, 1996, p. 214) and "a wish for death and suicidal tendencies" (Busfield, 1996, p. 218)—lead to his being labeled with it. Thus, gender becomes a determining factor in the way a mental pathology may be diagnosed and treated.

Septimus' being mentally ill entails a reconsideration of his masculinity and identity. For his wife, Rezia, he "wasn't Septimus any longer" (Woolf, 1925, p. 98), understanding his suicidal impulses as a personality disorder. Septimus' not performing his role/masculinity right has also been read as a sign of homosexuality (Cramer, 2010; Wolfe, 2005). The text does mention once the fact that Septimus "drew the attention, indeed the affection of his officer, Evans" (Woolf, 1925, p. 130), but their sexuality is not openly discussed. Anyhow, the lack of masculinity does not

[2] "Whilst the term was accepted by the War Office who set up an inquiry into the condition, it was officially banned by the Army Medical Services in 1917" (Busfield, 1996, p. 216).

imply homosexuality or inextricably lead to it. The novel, in fact, denaturalizes such heteropatriarchal assumptions about masculinity, as it mentions male prisoners who were accused of behaving "like a lady" if they "decorate[d] the dungeon" (Woolf, 1925, p. 117), or the fact that, as a man, "one might weep if no one saw" (Woolf, 1925, p. 230). Thus, gender, instead of assumed as a natural behavior, is presented as a matter of social role performance, with a clear emphasis on its publicity. For Septimus, it becomes imprisoning: "their marriage was over, he thought, with agony, with relief. The rope was cut; he mounted; he was free" (Woolf, 1925, p. 101). Free from, in his own words, the "duty to one's wife" (Woolf, 1925, p. 139). He feels free from having to perform his social role but also detached from what gave him a sense of meaning and purpose in life.

Clarissa follows a similar path(ology). Many critics have seen both characters as two sides of the same coin, with apparent different endings (Bazin, 1973). Clarissa also sees the pressure on social and gender performance as imprisoning: "are we not all prisoners?" (Woolf, 1925, p. 203). Besides, her sexuality is openly questioned: "she could not resist sometimes yielding to the charm of a woman […] this falling in love with women. Take Sally Seton; her relation in the old days with Sally Seton. Had not that, after all, been love?" (Woolf, 1925, p. 48). The omnipresence of war also connects her with Septimus: "every one has friends who were killed in the war" (Woolf, 1925, p. 99). Furthermore, Septimus' second doctor, Sir William Bradshaw, was one of the guests at the Dalloway's party. Just as Septimus established a clear link between psychiatry and the capitalist lucrative model of economy—"men who made ten thousand a year and talked of proportion" (Woolf, 1925, p. 224)—Clarissa suspected of him from the first moment: "one wouldn't like Sir William to see one unhappy. No; not that man" (Woolf, 1925, p. 278). Thus, they both question Bradshaw's rationality and psychiatry's functionality.

The critique to the psychiatric institution in *Mrs. Dalloway* also addresses, directly, its methods. The rest cure—at the time, the most popular treatment for states of neurosis like Septimus'—involved "isolation, complete bed rest for up to six weeks, a rich diet and enforced weight gain, and the absence of all intellectual activity" (Schowalter, 1992, p. xli).[3] Such is the treatment imposed by Dr. Bradshaw on his patients: "rest in solitude; silence and rest; rest without friends, without books, without messages; six months' rest; […] until they, too, shared his sense of proportion" (Woolf, 1925, p. 150): until their "unsocial impulses, bred more than anything by the lack of good blood, were held in control" (Woolf, 1925, p. 154). Here, mental illness is clearly identified with social deviance, also reflecting psychiatry's vision of mental disorder, with its "focus on the physical causes, and on physical treatments" (Busfield, 1996, p. 52). Unlike Septimus, Lady Bradshaw went

[3] As the own category of mental disorder and some of its names (neuroses, hysteria) were associated with womanhood, rest cures were "designed for nervous women by the American physician Silas Weir Mitchell, [and] imported to England in 1880s" (Williams, 2014, p. 1159). They contributed to that "hysterization of women," which "involved a thorough medicalization of their bodies and their sex […] in the name of the responsibility they owed to the health of their children, the solidity of the family institution, and the safeguarding of society" (Foucault, 1978, pp. 146–147).

through the whole treatment before becoming the doctor's wife. "Fifteen years ago she had gone under. It was nothing you could put your finger on; there had been no scene, no snap; only the slow sinking, water-logged, of her will into his," a procedure later referred to as "her submission" (Woolf, 1925, p. 152). She lacks any other name across the novel: her identity is completely reduced to her being the doctor's wife. Indeed, for Dr. Bradshaw, his patients became marionettes: he "was master of his own actions, which the patient was not" (Woolf, 1925, p. 153). So does Septimus feel, "as if inside his brain, by another hand, strings were pulled" (Woolf, 1925, p. 78); "he was in their power" (Woolf, 1925, p. 223). This sense of powerlessness triggers his suicide, putting into question the efficiency of the treatment.

Traditionally, from the perspective of the psychiatrist, and of the institution he represents, the act of suicide is seen as an irrational, incomprehensible act. This stigma—understanding suicide only in terms of madness—is disputed in the novel through Clarissa's comprehension and empathizing with Septimus. Not only she understands him but also "felt somehow very like him" too (Woolf, 1925, p. 283). "Death was an attempt to communicate" (Woolf, 1925, p. 280), and the message was intelligible for Clarissa. She does not pity him either; on the contrary, "she felt glad that he had done it" (Woolf, 1925, p. 280). Her thoughts wander around the parallels between them, and the implications of his suicide:

> She must have perished. She had escaped. But that young man had killed himself. […] It was her punishment to see sink and disappear here a man, there a woman, in this profound darkness, and she forced to stand here in her evening dress. (Woolf, 1925, p. 282)

She is then interrupted by the obligation to perform her social roles: "but she must go back. She must assemble. She must find Sally and Peter" (Woolf, 1925, p. 284). Although she may consider suicide as an escape to her regimented life, those obligations avoid a sense of emptiness in her. Contrarily, Septimus' institutionalization separates him from Rezia, completely against their wills. As Dr. Holmes forcefully enters "putting her aside (Holmes was a powerfully built man)" (Woolf, 1925, p. 225) to get Septimus, he sees suicide—jumping off the window—as his only escape from him, from psychiatry. Still, "he did not want to die. Life was good. The sun hot" (Woolf, 1925, p. 226). Rezia accepts his suicide comprehensively: "she ran to the window, she saw; she understood" (Woolf, 1925, pp. 226–227), finally thinking "of her memories, most were happy" (Woolf, 1925, p. 228). Suicide, overall, is presented as a rational and comprehensible act.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, suicide's etiology shifts its focus from the person to society and its institutions. "One cannot bring children into a world like this," Septimus thinks; "one cannot perpetuate suffering, or increase the breed of these lustful animals, who have no lasting emotions, but only whims and vanities, eddying them now this way, now that" (Woolf, 1925, p. 135). The novel, hence, constitutes an example of what Anne Hunsaker Hawkins calls, in her taxonomy of pathography, an "ecopathography," as it "links experience of illness with larger environmental, political, or cultural problems," and sees illness "as a cultural disease, the product of a toxic environment" (1999, p. 129). Thus, Hawkins' term extends the feminist claim that "the personal is political" into the field of (mental) illness.

Septimus' pathological history starts with his being obliged to participate in a war and his being deprived of the capacity to externalize or even feel emotions. The industries of masculinity and the military become hence intertwined, and Septimus' suicidal inclinations needed to be dissociated from his own masculine character: "it was cowardly for a man to say he would kill himself, but Septimus had fought; he was brave; he was not Septimus now" (Woolf, 1925, p. 33). So, Septimus keeps blaming himself and imagines a self-punitive suicide as "the verdict of human nature on such a wretch was death" (Woolf, 1925, p. 138)—his wretch being fully acting that dehumanizing masculinity. To prevent his suicidal thoughts, his life becomes more closely controlled by the doctors, with the counterproductive effect of his desiring to escape "to Italy – anywhere, anywhere away from Dr. Holmes. But Rezia could not understand him" (Woolf, 1925, p. 139). This sense of isolation increases his suicidal inclinations but, paradoxically, also brings a sense of liberty:

> He was deserted. The whole world was clamouring: Kill yourself, kill yourself, for our sakes. But why should he kill himself for their sakes? Food was pleasant; the sun hot; […] Besides, now that he was quite alone, condemned, deserted, as those who are about to die are alone, there was a luxury in it, an isolation full of sublimity; a freedom which the attached can never know. (Woolf, 1925, p. 140)

Thus, despite the initial self-punitive appearance of his suicidal thoughts, suicide eventually becomes the only way of escaping a lifeless and imprisoning existence. It acquires, hence, a rational dimension, as opposed to traditional views of suicide as irrational.

For Septimus, the consummation of suicide occurs in resistance to the rest cure, but suicidal thoughts arise from the conflict between being humane (having emotions) and being masculine (repressing them) as responses to traumatic events. Psychiatry's patient model, characterized by the *sick*'s passivity in the decision-making process, imposes a lack of control and powerlessness which eventually worsens the pathology. As for gender, it has been demonstrated how it influences what may be considered a pathology, and how it is socially and medically treated, so as not to threaten the patriarchal conception of masculinity. Besides, in Clarissa's considering suicide, it is implied that in the development of a pathology, there is no need for a traumatic event per se: the way gender is imposed—with its expectations and obligations—is traumatizing in itself. Overall, traditional psychiatry, ideologically aligned with those patriarchal conceptions of gender, has aimed to restore social functionality rather than mental well-being. Against this, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, suicide is rationalized and provided a comprehensibility and an intelligibility that challenges its traditional stigmatization.

3 Biopower, Necropower, and the Question of Agency in Suicide: Rhoda's Case (*The Waves*)

Whereas *Mrs. Dalloway* occurs over a day, *The Waves* focuses on mental life across different stages in the growth of the six central characters, passing from childhood to adolescence, adulthood and elderliness. It offers an in-depth perspective on how

they are affected and shaped by their environment, and how they react to it—or, in other more sociological words, how those social and gender roles are regulated (what Foucault called *biopower*) and how they assimilate and/or reject them. Agency and freedom are constantly questioned through the metaphor of either riding the waves or letting oneself be carried. While the rest of the characters, even if not always complacently, perform their role, Rhoda fails to do so due to her lack of adjustment to London's society—the British epitome of the capitalist city. Her subsequent suicide triggers a change of perspective from the mechanisms of biopower to those of *necropower*—the latter term derived from the former, coined by Achille Mbembé (2003). With a similar purpose, this analysis of suicide in *The Waves* also includes other perspectives, as Judith Butler's theories on gender performativity and body politics (1988) or Joan Busfield's analysis of assertions and denials of agency within mental disorder (1996). As in *Mrs. Dalloway*, suicide becomes rationalized instead of stigmatized, in this case with a clear focus on everything that precedes the act of suicide itself—the entire case story—rather than an ultimate motive.

The novel starts with the six protagonists' childhood, a stage in which their lives start being regulated and regimented by different social mechanisms and institutions—in *The Waves*, the school. The second italicized interlude introduces their step into formal education, in which differences start to arise, especially, in terms of gender, as they are sent to religious single-sex boarding schools (Woolf, 2000). Bernard, Louis, Susan, and Rhoda express their discomfort with the separation, together with an imperative to repress their feelings: "I must not cry" (Woolf, 2000, p. 16). For Rhoda, the change generates a feeling of lack of identity that will remain constant during the novel. At nursery school, her sense of identity is already presented as conflictive, with her "hopeless desire to be Susan, to be Jinny" (Woolf, 2000, p. 14); "she has no body as the others have" (Woolf, 2000, p. 14), notes Louis. However, it is at the boarding school where her feeling of lack of identity rises: "here I am nobody. I have no face. This great company, all dressed in brown serge, has robbed me of my identity. We are all callous, unfriended" (Woolf, 2000, p. 18), and, later again,

> other people have faces; Susan and Jinny have faces; they are here. […] they know what to say if spoken to. They laugh really; they get angry really; while I have to look first and do what other people do when they have done it. (Woolf, 2000, p. 23)

While Susan and Jinny adapt and perform better the roles they are given—Susan as the traditional housewife-mother and Jinny as a version of the *New Woman*—Rhoda is seen as unable to interiorize and perform such binary roles naturally.

Similarities arise between Septimus and Rhoda in their incapacity to act their social roles and their sense of separation from their community. Indeed, according to Foucault, educational and psychiatric institutions do not differ much from each other, neither in terms of architecture nor in terms of purpose, given "their large populations, their hierarchies, their spatial arrangements, their surveillance systems […] with privileged spaces or rituals such as the classroom, the dormitory, the visit, and the consultation" (1978, p. 46). To him, school and psychiatry are

complementary parts of the same industry—that of biopower—as they aim to shape and correct behaviors, respectively. In *The Waves*, Susan links school with lack of freedom, "order and discipline" (Woolf, 2000, p. 29). Foucault defines biopower as "the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life" that "carefully supplanted […] the old power of death that symbolized sovereign power" (1978, p. 139) during, and because of, "development of capitalism" (1978, p. 141). So, rather than merely repressive, biopower becomes productive—and more effective—with its mechanisms to "incite, reinforce, control, monitor, optimize, and organize the forces under it: a power bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them" (Foucault, 1978, p. 136). This vision of power implies that it is exerted not only towards those who deviate from the norm—Septimus, Rhoda—but towards everyone. For this reason, this biopower shows more blatantly in other characters, as Bernard or Susan.

Susan initially complies with her gender role happily, as she expresses a desire for transcending through motherhood. "His eyes will see when mine are shut, […] I shall go mixed with them beyond my body and shall see India" (Woolf, 2000, p. 96), she thinks. Later, she asserts having "reached the summit of [her] desires" (Woolf, 2000, p. 107) through motherhood, which brings a sense of decay and emptiness in her:

> Yet sometimes I am sick of natural happiness, and fruit growing, and children scattering the house […] I am sick of the body, I am sick of my own craft, industry and cunning, of the unscrupulous ways of the mother who protects, who collects under her jealous eyes at one long table her own children, always her own. (2000, p. 108)

This patriarchal naturalization of the "happiness" that childbearing and rearing are to bring to women exemplifies that creative essence of biopower (see Chap. 26 in this book). In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa expresses a similar dissatisfaction with womanhood and motherhood:

> But often now this body she wore (she stopped to look at a Dutch picture), this body, with all its capacities, seemed nothing— nothing at all. She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having of children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them, up Bond Street, this being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa any more; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway. (Woolf, 1925, p. 14)

With this, Clarissa and Susan denaturalize motherhood's fulfilment, emphasizing its patriarchal objectification of women.

They, like Rhoda and Septimus, also lay bare the link between biopower and the body. "My body has been used daily, rightly, like a tool by a good workman, all over" (Woolf, 2000, p. 121), Susan declares, implying that she was not the one using it, that her body did not belong entirely to her. Similarly, Jinny sees the decadence of her body as her detachment from a society in which she does not conform with beauty standards anymore: "I am in the heart of life. But look—there is my body in that looking glass. How solitary, how shrunk, how aged! I am no longer young. I am no longer part of the procession" (Woolf, 2000, p. 109). The bodies of the three female characters of *The Waves*—Rhoda, Susan, and Jinny—assimilate and

represent different "cultural meanings" (Butler, 1988, pp. 519–520).[4] Whereas Jinny and Susan come to bear culturally acceptable meanings for their bodies, Rhoda does not.

Rhoda, unable to adapt and comply with her role, becomes the object of biopower's punitive mechanisms. Early in the novel, right after Jinny feels she is gaining sovereignty over her body and self, Rhoda senses both selflessness and a lack of self-sovereignty: "identity failed me. We are nothing, I said, and fell. I was blown like a feather" (Woolf, 2000, p. 34). Her feeling of lack of identity is utterly and inextricably related to the body too, which she sees as "ill-fitting" (Woolf, 2000, p. 58). Rhoda, selfless and bodyless, is forced hence to perform artificially her role, through imitation of Susan and Jinny, but self-conscious of her inauthenticity: "what you did, I did. If Susan and Jinny pulled up their stockings like that, I pulled mine up like that also" (Woolf, 2000, p. 115). She develops a social anxiety:

> I am afraid of you all. I am afraid of the shock of sensation that leaps upon me, because I cannot deal with it as you do—I cannot make one moment merge in the next. To me they are all violent, all separate. (Woolf, 2000, p. 72)

Besides, Rhoda rejects London's capitalist lifestyle and values, as seen in Oxford Street, where she finds "hate, jealousy, hurry, and indifference frothed into the wild semblance of life" (Woolf, 2000, p. 89). "What dissolution of the soul you demanded in order to get through one day, what lies, bowings, scrapings, fluency and servility!" (Woolf, 2000, p. 115), she denounces. Her suicidal inclinations are first openly reflected in an oneiric vision. Using the metaphor of the waves, she asks to be carried as she jumps "over the precipice" (Woolf, 2000, p. 116). "I touch nothing. I see nothing" (Woolf, 2000, p. 116), she declares, as her bodylessness is becoming more acute as she loses her senses. In Bernard' final soliloquy, where her suicide is communicated, he observes how Rhoda "was disgusted […] by our cruelty" (2000, p. 137)—very much like Septimus. As in *Mrs. Dalloway*, suicide is rationalized through other characters' comprehension and empathy.

The question that arises now is that of agency: whether Rhoda's suicide was a consequence of a punitive biopower—necropower—that led her to death, or it was a rebellion against it, a way of escaping it. Achille Mbembé (2003) defined necropower following biopower's capacity to "disallow [life] to the point of death" (Foucault, 1978, p. 138). Mbembé (2003) compares biopower to a situation of warfare in which infrastructures are also targeted, so that punishments are not exerted only physically but also worsening the conditions of living. He describes and explains necropower through the slave life, which "in many ways, is a form of death-in life" (2003, p. 21). Suicide—either individual or in mass—occurs at the crossroads between "freedom and negation"; so while "it can be represented as

[4] "Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time -an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (Butler, 1988, p. 519).

agency" (Mbembé, 2003, p. 39), it can also represent the ultimate form of self-punishment; see Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "psychic repression" as a form of assimilated "social repression" (1983, p. 119). In connection to gender, Butler saw those "punitive consequences" as a part of patriarchal biopower, as "those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished" (1988, p. 522). Mbembé concluded his essay on necropolitics suggesting that "under conditions of necropower, the lines between resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom are blurred" (2003, p. 40). Suicide, then, can hardly be viewed only as the consequence of a self-punitive madness—which denies any type of agency—or as an act of rebellion/evasion. Neither of the components, negation (necropower) and agency (rebellion) can be withdrawn from the equation—at least in Rhoda's and Septimus' cases.

In the junction of suicide, both social regulations and the freedom to transgress them play their part. Fostering or disallowing certain modes of life, especially those in relation with gender, leads to violent/suicidal reactions against a body/life which, they feel, completely escapes their control. However, they do not only occur in examples like Septimus' or Rhoda's, who do not perform their roles appropriately: in both *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Waves*, "sane" (socially complying) characters like Clarissa or Susan express a similar dissatisfaction as well as rebellious impulses against their bodies/lives. With their sanity/functionality unquestioned, they lack self-punishment. As in *Mrs. Dalloway*¸ suicide in *The Waves* is approached understandingly by these non-suicidal characters. And neither is agency denied through a mentally impairing disorder: Rhoda does not even constitute a psychiatric case. She fails to adapt to London's "sick" environment and society, which lacks alternatives beyond binary gender and its norms. Ceasing functioning within such society through suicide is, indeed, the product of both negation and liberty.

4 Beyond the Reality-Fiction Dichotomy: Virginia Woolf's Suicide Case and History

Virginia Woolf's suicide has been largely discussed, both at the time and in the present. While traditional approaches saw it as caused by a partly inherited madness—with no further explanation—contemporary ones have focused on her entire case history, adding a gender and a scientific perspective. These analyses have examined two key factors in her development of mental pathologies: her being sexually abused as a child and as a teenager by her half-brothers and her constant contact with death and war. The diagnosis of her condition has also changed as the terminology has been updated, shifting from just madness, to psychosis, schizophrenia, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and bipolar disorder. The institutionalizations and rest cures she was forced to undergo have also been questioned, and, furthermore, they have been seen as potential worsening agents. Virginia Woolf attempted to commit suicide twice before succeeding in 1941; she left several "residuals"—her

diary and letters—that, together with her fictional works, have helped understand her reasoning despite the initial stigmatization.

The original conclusion from the authorities pointed, indeed, to her being mad as a self-explanatory cause. The original coroner's sentence was that she committed suicide "while the balance of her mind was disturbed," an assumption that started being problematized in the 1970s (Kenney, 1975, p. 269). Ballester-Roca and Ibarra-Rius also note how scholars traditionally associated her illness with a "hereditary factor" (2018, p. 225), something that often occurs with mental illnesses, including shell shock (Busfield, 1996). In Lester (2008), even claimed that she committed suicide to prevent herself from going mad, "because of a fear of mental illness" (p. 125), which still reflects a slightly outdated view of madness. Non-scholars have also rejected madness as her sole motivation; in a 2002 documentary film,

> Nigel Nicolson – the son of her good friend and lover, Vita Sackville-West, who knew her as a young boy and who is also editor of her series of letters – claimed that Virginia died in a cruel, self-punitive way, a decision made almost rationally. (Androutsopoulou et al., 2020, p. 367)

In the same documentary, "Hermione Lee, her most prominent biographer, said she believed that Virginia's suicide was an act of courage and brevity, not an act of madness" (Androutsopoulou et al., 2020, p. 367). On a similar line, for Bazin, her suicide was a rejection of "the terms on which she was going to live" (1973, p. 284). Thus, in the last decades, academics studying herself and suicide have focused on what made her *mad*—what led her to that mental state (Androutsopoulou et al., 2020; Ballester-Roca and Ibarra-Rius, 2018; Boeira et al., 2017; Lester, 2008; Lounsberry, 2018; Williams, 2014).

Virginia Woolf's pathological history is defined by the multiplicity of events that directly affected her mental condition and will to live. Apart from her being sexually abused as a child and teenager, other factors include, mostly, her early exposition to unexpected death of close family members, the threat of war, the aggressive and dehumanizing rest cures she was forced to undergo, and her sense of guilt. Another potential risk factor was the pathologization of homosexuality that prevailed then (Foucault, 1978), especially with the rise of fascism and the threat of Nazism. Her bisexuality was well documented, especially with her affair with Vita Sackville-West and with her love relationship, allegedly non-sexual, with Violet Dickinson (Lester, 2008). Regarding death, she was afflicted, first, by "her mother's, half-sister's (Stella), and favourite brother's (Thoby)" (Androutsopoulou et al., 2020, p. 367), later by some of her friends'—including two who committed suicide—and also by her nephew's, who died during the Spanish Civil War serving the anti-fascist side (Lester, 2008). In the analysis of her diaries, Lounsberry comments that they become "one huge, multiform, battle against the advancing war" (2018, p. 11), and Kenney remarks the emptiness and meaninglessness that it brought to her, as "bombs fell so close the windows broke" (1975, p. 273). The omnipresence of war—worsened by the fact that Leonard was Jewish—led to a suicide pact between both in May 1940 if Hitler won (Lester 2008; Lounsberry 2018; Williams 2014)—less than a year before her suicide. This combination of factors contributed to her mental condition, and rest cures did not help either.

Woolf was institutionalized several times. Her first two "breakdowns" and consequent institutionalizations occurred after the deaths of her mother and her father, when she was 13 and 22, respectively (Kenney, 1975, p. 226). The third happened after marrying Leonard in 1913, when "she refused to eat, slept all the time, and tried to commit suicide by taking a sleeping draught" (Kenney, 1975, p. 267). Shortly after, in 1914, she was reported to have "lapsed into a manic stage in which she talked non-stop, had hallucinations that her mother was in the room, [and] took a violent aversion to Leonard Woolf," which continued for a year (Kenney, 1975, p. 267). Leonard imposed a rest cure on her (Boeira et al., 2017), "us[ing] force" when she did not comply (Kenney, 1975, p. 269). As with Septimus, their imposition by force proves ineffective, especially in the mid-long term, as her mental illness persevered, and suicidal thoughts and attempts continued.[5]

Just as contemporary psychiatry has shifted towards community care and insists on the realization of different therapeutical activities—completely opposing rest cures—several entries in Virginia Woolf's diary mention her joyful inclination for them (2021). After the death of a close Bloomsbury friend, Lytton Strachey, she expresses a "desire to be with friends" (Lounsberry, 2018, p. 65), and, shortly before her suicide, Androutsopoulou et al. remark that she "prescribes to herself various antidepressants: reading, cooking, cycling, visits to the museum, writing new books, visits from friends" (2020, p. 377). As for the writing, recently it has been commonly recognized as both a coping mechanism (Kenney, 1975) and as a way to "escape from illness" (Ballester-Roca & Ibarra-Rius, 2018, p. 226). However, for many doctors, writing aggravated her mental health and "recommended that she stop writing" (Ballester-Roca & Ibarra-Rius, 2018, p. 229). Contrarily to this, Lounsberry identifies the gradual ceasing of writing as symptomatic of a worsening of her mental state: while she used to write several diary entries a month, she wrote only three in February, and two in March—the last one "four days before her suicide" (2018, p. 257). Rest cures and their ineffectiveness were counterproductive for Woolf in two ways: firstly, they prevented her from all potentially therapeutical activity, including writing, and, secondly, they increased her sense of guilt for not healing.

Guilt has been one of the most common denominators in analyses of Woolf's pathologies. It reportedly caused her second breakdown and institutionalization—together with a severe depression—as she was "obsessed by guilt at having wished for [her father's] death" (Kenney, 1975, p. 266). The symptoms of the fourth breakdown, in which she eventually suicided, also included "sudden and deep depression, confusion, hallucinations, and a sensation of extreme guilt" (Kenney, 1975, p. 268). Days before her suicide, her sister wrote a "desperate letter" to her, "urging her not [to] "become an invalid" in a time of war" (Androutsopoulou et al., 2020, p. 380). In her final, best-known suicide note, guilt appears in her sense of being spoiling Leonard's life: "I know that I am spoiling your life, […] I can't go on spoiling your

[5] Lee and Barret note how therapists' impositions of "no-suicide contracts"—which are part of rest cures—fail much more than succeed (2005, p. 847).

life any longer" (Kenney, 1975, p. 265). Such sense of guilt and responsibility was also brought by psychiatry's view of the mentally ill as responsible for their condition. While nowadays a sector of psychiatry has assimilated part of that sociological criticism to their practices, there still exists a reactionary front that keeps ignoring it.

A wider, feminist perspective on mental sanity has also changed studies and perspectives on Virginia Woolf's suicide, pointing to the sexual abuses she suffered as a child and teenager as a major cause for her mental condition. Her two half-brothers sexually harassed her, first "Gerald at age 6" (Androutsopoulou et al., 2020, p. 367) and then George at age 17–22 (Lester, 2008). Williams 2014's psychological study of Virginia Woolf's case found direct correlations between child sexual abuse (CSA), the development of depression, and the increasement of suicide tendencies, which pointed to CSA "as an additional risk for suicide, either as a "distal" and indirect cause or as a "proximal" and direct cause" (p. 1156). Earlier in 1996, Busfield investigated the similarities in the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) suffered by war veterans and victims of sexual violence. In both cases, potential symptoms include "flashbacks […] dreams or nightmares of the events […] forget[fulness] […] sense of vulnerability and fear" (Busfield, 1996, p. 227) and "short and long-term" depression (Busfield, 1996, p. 228). The pathology, Busfield observes, is not rooted in "a single human traumatic event, but [in] the build-up of psychological tension in a situation of continuing powerlessness" (1996, p. 221). She also sees guilt as a pattern in patriarchal conceptualisations of sexual violence, "in which women are somehow held responsible for what has happened" (Busfield, 1996, p. 224). Finally, she insists on "analysing sexual violence in terms of issues of power and social control and not as a matter of individual pathology," with the purpose of "making visible what was invisible, defining as unacceptable what was acceptable" (Busfield, 1996, p. 224). Henceforth, suicide—the consequence of those pathologies—can and must be analyzed in the same terms too.

Indeed, although part of its incomprehensibility arises from the fact that people without any diagnosed pathology also commit it, suicide has been demonstrated to happen much more commonly in people with certain mental disorders. However, the category of mental disorder has traditionally belonged to the realm of femininity. In Busfield's distinction between madness and badness, she recognizes a patriarchal tendency to classify "problematic female behaviours" as "mental disorder" to be corrected and "problematic male behaviours" as "delinquency" or "wrongdoing" (1996, p. 104) to be punished. These conceptualizations underlie a sexist vision of women as passive and dependent of men, incapable of wrongdoing because of their irrationality, and men as active and independent, rational and so capable of wrongdoing, so that "assumptions or denials of agency are in practice gender-related" (Busfield, 1996, p. 105). In opposition with female irrationality, "rationality is more likely to be presumed in the case of men simply because it is part of the definition of being a man – of being manly" (Busfield, 1996, p. 108). Fittingly, both constructions contribute to "maintain and enhance" patriarchal power and its relations (Busfield, 1996, p. 108). So, even in suicide, traditionally, men seem to die with dignity, wilfully, and rationally, while women are said to be subjected to irrational emotions and impulses they cannot control, as it happened with Virginia Woolf.

Consequently, unmasculine or feminine behaviors in men have been seen as symptoms of mental illnesses too. They are labeled with terms used to define—and construct—femininity, such as "dependent" or "passive," or as "neurotic or psychotic" in cases of homosexuality (Busfield, 1996, p. 100). In Busfield's words, "as long as men conform to the conception of male mental health they can escape being defined as disturbed," whereas "what is appropriate for women"—being emotional, passivity and powerlessness—"is close to mental disorder," which needs to be "managed" (1996, p. 101). Rape has been recognized as one of the different causes of PTSD, but within marriage, it was legal by law in the UK until the 1990s (Busfield, 1996). The own "images of women frequently emphasise," and hence encourage, "their tendency to feelings of anxiety, sadness and fear" (Busfield, 1996, p. 107). In that sense, "shell shock" became an inevitable exception as a "male disorder" (Busfield, 1996, p. 213). Thus, psychiatric terminology, as the own domains of mental sanity and insanity, becomes gender biased and gender specific, with its industry and structuring of mental disorder as a femininity, and vice versa.

A patriarchal conception of gender is, hence, found at the ideological basis of many of the factors that led Virginia Woolf to her suicide. Her madness, hysteria, neurosis, depression, psychosis, schizophrenia, PTSD, or bipolar disorder—whatever name it may be given—cannot be dissociated from the ambience, the environment in which she grew and lived. CSA, and the consequent propensity towards feelings of guilt and depression in adulthood in its victims, stands indeed as the germ of her pathology—as it is Evans' death for Septimus. This pathology was intensified by sociopolitical circumstances, like the omnipresence of war and its psychological impact, or the psychiatric treatment she received in correspondence with coetaneous visions of sane and insane womanhood and femininity. In this, too, her case resembles Septimus'. Their mental breakdowns and their occasional detachment from reality is also a shared trait in their pathological history, as it is their very suicide. Nonetheless, this does not imply that Virginia Woolf was somehow fated to die like her character. Rather, these parallels indicate a problematization and questioning of the institutions and structures that lead both to such ending.

5 Conclusions

Although much literary criticism has fallen for this, literary works discussing suicide cannot be seen as warnings about an author's inclination for suicide: literary analysis is not a quest for evidence in which everything points towards an ultimate, inevitable consequence. Such literary works do, however, shed light on suicide, a matter that has traditionally been tabooed and obscured. So does Virginia Woolf's fiction, thematizing that toxic, mentally sickening environment, and placing the realm of suicide prevention outside an institutionalization that does not address that environment and forces the user to adapt to it. This does not imply an advocation for the abolition of psychological attention in itself—see how, when Septimus "gives in," he acknowledges a need for help: "now he had surrendered; now other people

must help him. People must be sent for" (Woolf, 1925, p. 136). Instead, MH seek, firstly, to humanize medical and psychological support and, secondly, to call sciences of the mind (psychiatry, psychology, neuroscience, etc.) to action, to political implication, to demonstrate that indeed certain pathologies are rooted in culture itself (ecopathologies), so that scientific knowledge contributes to enhance such culture and living conditions. Following this, what must be prevented is not mainly and only suicide: it is, also, that toxicity in the environment, so that we approach the pathology before the pathology starts, addressing the illness rather than just the ill.

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Chapter 4
"Death Beats in My Heart Everyday": A Sociological Reading of Suicidal Intent in Sara Shagufta's Works

Rashmi Joshi

Sara Shagufta (1954–1984) is an Urdu poet from Pakistan who died of suicide. Her preoccupation with death is apparent in her works; death finds semblance in multiple clear articulations of suicidal instincts in her letters and various imageries that convey loneliness, hopelessness, and isolation in her poems. In the letters to friends written during the later years when her mental health deteriorated, she narrates the traumatic life events in addition to societal nonacceptance that contributed to her circumstances and susceptibility to suicide. Primarily focusing on Sara Shagufta's works and her interactions with the cultural, social, and political system of the patriarchal society of Pakistan, I will contextualize her suicide as a structural issue rather than limiting it to the interior workings of her mind in isolation from the external settings. Since the study focuses on a South Asian author, hitherto unrepresented in suicide studies, it will decentre the focus from western writers and question the idea of a single universal theory of suicide that blurs differences based on gender, culture, and other such variables. Consequently, the study will emphasize that preventive measures need to be reimagined, localized rather than universalized, to understand and eliminate the causes of suicide based on spatial and cultural differences.

Suicides have been discussed frequently in literature, even more than mental illnesses. From fictional representations of suicide to autobiographical explorations of writers who die of suicide to suicides in general, philosophers, sociologists, and religious figures have always been preoccupied with the idea of suicide, mostly oscillating between the extreme perception of ostracizing people who die of it or being liberal about it and considering it as a matter of individual choice (see Chap. 13 in this book). In the case of critical readings of suicides of authors, the dominant framework has been to chart out an autobiographical account of their life and then

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read their works concerning it, analyzing the overt and covert ways in which the desire to consider suicide finds a way in their writings.

In *The Savage God* (1971), a seminal work on the literary representation of suicides, Al Alvarez lays bare the genealogy of suicide and how perception about it changed with different periods of history, more importantly with movement from society at the core of human life to individuality. Alvarez's statement—"suicide has permeated western culture like a dye that cannot be washed out"—reflects how suicide has become a part of mainstream discussion in the West so much that its reading is almost normalized (1971, p. 235). The pitfall, however, of this normalized reading is the absence of nuances while dealing with it, with an increased focus on the universality of a theory that subsumes and thus neglects how motivations can differ with individuals from different gendered, cultural, and social backgrounds. Of the theories of suicide that Alvarez discusses in his book, almost all of them are characterized by a focus on the workings of the mind of the potential suicides leaving out the factors outside the mind that could aggravate and sometimes be the primary cause of suicidal instincts. This is evident in the research-based results that have shown that there are a variety of reasons that contribute to suicide, external as much as internal, and an amalgamation of the two.

In the context of South Asian countries, especially the Indian subcontinent, the problem does not only lie in the assumption of the centrality of the western world in most of the theories of suicide, but also due to the relative invisibility of cases of author suicides. Through meditation on the causes of this relative invisibility with a focus on the life and works of a significant but neglected Pakistani poet, Sara Shagufta, this chapter intends to work towards an intersection of the mechanics of gender and cultural setting and analyzes how they affect one's propensity to give in to suicide.

1 Background of Sara Shagufta

Sara Shagufta was born on 31 October 1954 in Gujranwala, Pakistan, in a lower-middle-class family struggling with a severe economic crisis after her father left her mother to marry another woman. A part of Sara's childhood was spent helping her mother in managing the household with the bare minimum, along with her siblings, as she took up work like making garlands (Pritam, 1996). In her letters to Amrita Pritam, she mentions being conscious of her mother's grief and plight while dealing with the deception of a man she loved and got married to as well as simultaneously struggling to feed her children. The financially depreciating condition of the family is apparent as Sara recollects the experiences of her childhood in one of her letters to Pritam: "the fire usually does not get anything to feed upon, and in our house, the fire kept getting thirstier" (Pritam, 1996, p. 14). Married to a poet when she was very young, Shagufta was constantly abused in all the four marriages that she tried to get into in her life. She mentions these distressing instances of domestic violence in her letters to Amrita Pritam: "He [Shagufta's first husband] was so ignorant that he would beat me on trivial matters, and so much that my body was bruised blue" (Pritam, 1996, p. 22).

In addition to the pain of being separated from her three children, whom she loved dearly, and witnessing the death of her newborn child due to the negligence of her husband, Sara Shagufta was traumatized because of her experience of all the relationships that she tried to build through the institution of marriage. Her third husband's insistence on her not reading or writing or stepping outside the house alone, as for him it was not in accordance with the custom of their house is an echo of the patriarchal mentality of all the men whom she married: abusive, patriarchal, and restrictive (Pritam, 1996). These experiences affected her mental health severely, and she underwent electric shock therapy more than once. Most of her poems and letters were written during this time and are reflexive of her agony screaming her trauma in metaphors that are devoid of life and search death repeatedly.

2 Gender and Suicide

In the dominant framework of reading suicide in the western world, the gendered reading of it was theoretically strengthened in Victorian England. While female suicides were "trivialized as emotional acts," male suicides were contextualized in their financial and sociocultural background (Deacon, 2015, p. 2; see also Chap. 3 in this book). This reflects the gender politics of the Victorian times imitating the gender role binaries that were prevalent in the society with women being relegated to the more passive, private sphere, and men being a part of the supposedly active, public sphere. This gendered reading of suicide has passed on since then and can be distinctly seen in the readings of the suicide of authors in the twentieth century wherein the case of women writers' suicide is read through an exploration of their emotional well-being, and in the case of male writers, it becomes a philosophical and sociological problem. In his study of the gendered reading of suicides, Kushner (1985) argues that the conclusion is mostly is based on presumptions that have not been verified or looked at through different lenses and ways of sampling. These biased conclusions, then, continue to affect theories that assume the gendered nature of suicide as a given, leading to strengthened gendered readings rather than attempts at debunking these readings.

The link between gender and suicide, however, is more complicated than this, as explored by the World Health Organization in a study on the effect of gender disparities on mental health. The study claims that the prescribed gender roles that place women in a lower social and cultural hierarchy than men are responsible for their increased exposure to "negative experiences" as compared to men. This leads to "mental health risk factors," which are a major reason for the psychological disorders apparent in women that "involve serious violations of their rights as human beings including their sexual and reproductive rights" (2002, p. 4). Although the study assumes universality, this is truer in the case of South Asian countries, specifically that of the Indian subcontinent, more so in rural areas, where the gender hierarchies are more solidified than the contemporary urban or western society. Sara Shagufta's personal life with her repeated emphasis on her encounters with

domestic violence in all her four marriages and her husbands' insistence on "punishing" her as and when she trespassed the traditionally submissive role assigned to women, as narrated by her in her letters to Amrita Pritam, is a testimony to this. Her tone as she narrates her experience—"However, this is not a big issue. The husbands in our society are like this only. And wives have to be receptive of this" (Pritam, 1996, p. 22)—merges her personal experience into the repressive and patriarchal society of her times.

3 Invisibility of Suicide Narratives in South Asian Context

In their sociological analysis of suicide in Pakistan, Zubair Ahmed, Ilyas Bhati, and Rizwana Kausar link this predominance of being vulnerable to mental illnesses and suicide in women with the invisibility of the statistics on suicide in the public sphere. Official records of suicide, as they argue, are not maintained by the police due to their apparent link with "domestic disputes," a supposedly private matter (Ahmed et al., 2019, p. 420). In lieu of official documentation, studies on suicide in Pakistan have to rely on information collected by NGOs and newspaper articles where suicides are mentioned frequently, of people of all genders, but these suicides fail to be registered or recorded due to the lack of a systemized way to record them. Thus, a coherent and explorative analysis of suicides is missing in the context of Pakistan. Factors like legal implications, as suicide is seen as a criminal offence in Pakistan under Pakistan Penal Code 309, also contribute to the comparative invisibility of suicide narratives or their analysis in the setting of Pakistan as compared to the West (Khan & Reza, 1998). In addition to this, from the sociocultural perspective, suicides are connected to family honor, more so in the case of suicides by women, where families try to prohibit the access of information about suicides in their family to the public sphere as it might cause damage to their social respectability (Khan & Reza, 1998). Writings that anticipate suicide, then, also encounter similar censure at the hands of the family as well as the state. Sara Shagufta's family's burning of her letters and poems as trash to hide them from the eyes of the public during her lifetime as well as after her suicide are reflective of this insistence on saving family honor (Pritam, 1996). This is a primary reason for the inaccessibility of writings of Sara Shagufta and, by extension, the invisibility of writings by people who have died of suicide or written on suicide in Pakistan and South Asian societies with similar notions of family honor.

4 Islam's Perception of Women and Suicide

It has been argued by consensus among researchers that Islam "openly condemns suicide," for people of all genders, equally (Rezaeian, 2008, p. 79). Statistics about suicide might trick one into believing that the least percentage of suicidal cases are

from countries with high "religious participation," but this aligns with the underreporting of such cases due to "concerns over public disgrace" in these countries (Rezaeian, 2008, p. 78). In a study on suicides in Pakistan, Murad Moosa Khan and Hashim Reza debunk this myth in the case of Islam, specifically Pakistan, arguing that the "strong religious proscriptions" of suicide do not simply lead to a lowered number of cases of suicide, instead the real number of cases are hidden due to notions of national and personal shame (2000, p. 34). While researchers argue that there is no difference between the status that Islamic religious texts assign to women and men, there does exist a gap between the status accorded to Muslim women in religious texts and the legal and social implementation or non-implementation of the same. The violent Islamization of Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq's regime in Pakistan is an example of how orthodox interpretation of Islam at the hands of men is not only biased towards women, but acts as a threat to their freedom and humaneness, instantly claiming for them a subordinate position than that of men. In the predicament of cases of suicide, then, women face more taboo than men (see Chap. 26 in this book) because of their socially sanctioned inferior positioning and the notion that they are seen as primary holders of honor of the family which gets shattered with any deviation from the normal religious or social conduct.

5 Social, Political, and Cultural Setting of the Pakistan of Shagufta's Times

Sara Shagufta's prime years of writing lie within Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq's extremely patriarchal and politically stifling military regime (1977–1988). After taking charge in July 1977, Zia asserted on Islamization of the nation to forge a united national identity. Although the environment of the Pakistan of Zia's rule was suffocating for all, women were primarily targeted with laws liked Hudood Ordinance and Law of Evidence among others that not only affected their social freedom and movement but also their very humanity as they were legally seen as subservient to men (Khan, 2009). However, as Rukhsana Ahmad argues in her anthology of contemporary Urdu feminist poetry, *We Sinful Women* (1991), Zia's regime was only the final nail in the coffin, the process of controlling women had started much earlier with right-wing fundamentalists asserting orthodox conventions considering them synonymous with Islam. In his analysis of the status of Muslim women, Asghar Ali Engineer explains this continuous repression of women as a result of the male-dominated ideologies that in turn led to religious interpretations. Thus, asserting that it was not Islamic religion that was responsible for women's status but that it in itself was a consequence of the male-dominated intellectual and public space that allowed men to interpret these religious texts in their favor assigning a lower status to women (Engineer, 1994).

The male dominance that Engineer talks about extends to the Urdu literary lineages, especially poetry with male poets assuming it as their territory, traditionally

writing verses that relegated women to the position of the object, "an abstraction" whose existence is confined to their desirability by the male poet (Mir & Mir, 2006, p. 220). Although through the writings of the progressive poets of the twentieth century, the role seemed to change with male poets trying to bring across the oppression of women in their writings. But their tone was patronizing for the most part shadowing the subject position of the women they talked about as they assumed it was their responsibility to speak and consequently act on their behalf. An attempt to penetrate this male populated culture, at the level of space and thought, was made during Zia's regime with women poets and activists coming to the forefront against extreme censure on women, their clothing and their movement outside the domestic space, and their rights in marriage (Alavi, 1988). Although these women poets (Sara Shagufta's contemporaries) subverted and challenged the patriarchal and sexist notions of the society, they were "finally functioning within the system that they so fiercely criticise" (Oesterheld, 2004, p. 226). In her Ph.D. thesis, Katherine Peters (2017) explains this in the case of Parveen Shakir, a contemporary of Sara Shagufta, who tried to find a middle ground between her feminist ideals and the cultural context of the society she was living in, as a survival strategy.

6 Erasure of Sara Shagufta from the Canon of Urdu Women's Poetry

Living in a society like this, Sara Shagufta was not only at a disadvantage because of her gender like her contemporary women poets but also because of her lower-middle-class background. Kamran Asdar Ali explains the impact of her class on how she was morally policed for her life choices, "the reasons for which are at times found in her belonging to the lower classes, with its implicit connotation of an "immoral upbringing"" (2013). In addition to this, she failed to keep her lived experience and her written words at a distance, breaking away constantly from the conventionally oppressing lifestyle. Asad Alvi, a translator of Sara Shagufta's poems and journal entries sees her poetry as "an expression of agency" but is also aware of how it has been pushed into the dark due to negligence (Modi, 2016). This negligence is not accidental but is a systematic process that stems from the ways of reading Sara Shagufta during her life that seem to have strengthened after her suicide. Like the poets of her times, who saw Shagufta as a woman morally and sexually deviant over her colleague poets, the male-dominated Urdu poetic and academic circle continues to refuse to read Sara Shagufta's poems as an expression of her agony that can easily be extended to cover the general condition of the lower-class Muslim women in the Pakistan of her times. Male Urdu poets are famous despite their ways of living outside the moral centre of society, but a woman poet like Sara Shagufta is denied readership, not only by the intellectuals but by her own family members who were ashamed of her because of her ways of living. They have controlled the accessibility of her writings by burning them so that they do not enter the

public domain. The invisibility of Sara Shagufta from the liminal space provided to Urdu women's poetry, then, seems like a success of the patriarchal society that cannot read a woman poet beyond her personal life choices evaluating her from the lenses of "middle-class respectability" unable to be tolerant of the diverse ways of existence outside it (Ali, 2013).

7 Contextualizing Sara Shagufta

Asad Alvi sees Shagufta's experiences as a testimony to her defiant spirit, classifying her poems as an "expression of agency" (Modi, 2016). Alvi's statement seems problematic because more than an expression of agency, Shagufta's works, including her poems, are a shrill cry of a woman so helpless and tortured at the hands of the patriarchal world of Pakistan that she chose to be "silent," a silence she talks about constantly in her letters and poems. Meditating on the representation of madwoman in the postcolonial literatures in her book, *The Madwoman Can't Speak: Or Why Insanity Is Not Subversive*, Marta Caminero-Santangelo writes: "Perhaps the reason why the madwoman continues to be such an enticing figure is that she offers the illusion of power, although she provides a symbolic resolution whose only outcome must be greater helplessness" (1998, p. 3). This is true in the case of Sara Shagufta who is constantly read, in the liminal space that she is read devoid of ethical preoccupations of people, as someone who exercised her agency while continuing to assert her selfhood, in defiance of the norms of the Pakistani society of her times in her life as well as her suicide. Although such a reading is constructive in creating a space for Sara Shagufta in the world of Urdu poets, hitherto denied to her, it complicates her agony as a triumph, something that Sara Shagufta would have herself disproved.

In her lifetime, Shagufta was not only devoid of hope due to her life circumstances but also due to the male-dominated Mushaira culture in Pakistan, "a bastion of male privilege" as Asad Alvi calls it (Modi, 2016). This male-dominated poetic circle constantly reduced her to her body as her contemporary male poets schooled her to conduct herself more "respectably" to be taken seriously (Pritam, 1996, p. 59). In a sharp critique of the misogynistic nature of this circle, Sara Shagufta writes, "when I don't laugh along with them/they turn up against me" (Pritam, 1996, p. 19). Her letters bring about the difficulty of existing as a single woman poet in the Urdu poetic circle and Pakistani society. Attiya Dawood, a contemporary of Sara Shagufta, also acknowledges this "violent gender politics" prevalent in the intellectual spaces in Pakistan that made it difficult for women poets to exist in the literary space, "that on the altar of Poetry, it is women's bodies that become sacrificial goats, that women's bodies become subservient to men's ideas" (Alvi, 2018). This can be seen in the way Sara Shagufta has been erased from the canon of Urdu poetry despite being acknowledged for her "enormous literary talent," as her poems are continuously read as an extension of her character. Trivialized because of the gendered

readings, her poems are seen as mere cries of a madwoman as opposed to the supposedly philosophically sound verses of male poets (Ali, 2013). Throughout her life and even after, Shagufta is read through a lens of morality that condemns her not because of her poems but refuses to read her poems because of what is known about her life.

In two separate studies of suicide, primarily concerned with Pakistan, marriage is connected to an increased vulnerability to mental distress for women (Khan & Reza, 2000; Rezaeian, 2008). In light of this finding and evidence from the letters that Shagufta wrote to Pritam, it would not be an overstatement to conclude that Sara Shagufta's deteriorating mental health is closely connected to her married life, by extension her children. Children are dominant imagery in her poems, her grief of being parted from them, of seeing her firstborn die prematurely contributes to her vehement disorientation with the ways of living of the world. In her poem, *The Milestone Accompanies for Hours*, translated by Arshi Yaseen, Shagufta (1985) breathes this pain of longing on paper as she writes, "[m]y children's misfortunes/have stained my clothes." Shagufta's preoccupation with death and related imageries is apparent in her poems as well as her letters; death in her work finds semblance in various images that she creates to make it appear more real and alive, "I remain under the sneaky watch of my coffin" (1985).

8 Conclusion

Although Shagufta's poems and letters are read as an extension of her personal life, she constantly connects this personal world of hers to that of the common women in Pakistan with rhetorical questions like "does a woman have no more of a country than her body?" (Pritam, 1996, p. 19) and her reflections on the general condition of women in Pakistan: "we are the eyes devoid of hope" (Pritam, 1996, p. 26). In her letters, Shagufta continues to draw upon the experiences of other women in Pakistani society indicating the widespread nature of violence exercised by the agents of patriarchy that has led many women to the edges. In her experience of staying at the mental asylum, Shagufta talks about the fellow women patients she met there, each narrating a story of oppression, abuse, violation at the hands of men that led them to the mentally unstable condition they were in (Pritam, 1996). In a society like this, distinctively different from that of her western counterparts, reading Sara Shagufta's suicide as a philosophical problem, isolated from the sociocultural environment of her times is a redundant attempt. Thus, there is a need to step out of the philosophical framework and locate her life within the social, cultural, and political milieu of Pakistan where, as her fellow patients at the mental asylum told her, "to step into the world outside that of the asylum was to step into the real asylum" (Pritam, 1996, p. 154).

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Chapter 5
Inside the Medical Suicidal Mind: Felipe Trigo's Death by Suicide and Its Self-Novelization as a Way of Understanding Suicide in Contemporary Practitioners

Andy Eric Castillo Patton

The analysis of suicide in non-fiction and fiction literature, since the outstanding contributions of Edwin Shneidman and Norman Farberow in suicidology, and Al Álvarez in literary studies, has focused on the leading hints and causes that spark suicide in "suicidal minds." However, these studies—and those that follow the lead of analysing suicide notes, letters, and novels—tend to leave out the understanding of a particular "suicidal mind": the one of medical practitioners. As it is well known, physicians and medical students have had historically one of the highest rates in suicide deaths compared to other professional profiles. But despite some leading and late research as that developed by Pamela Wible, there is a scarcity of studies on the novelization of suicide by medical authors that died by their own hand. Therefore, this chapter delves into the "suicidal mind" of physicians in contemporary Spain. Special attention is paid to the work and biography of Felipe Trigo (1864–1916), who novelized his death by suicide in his novel *El médico rural* (1912), a continuation of *En la carrera* (1909), doppelganger of his experience as rural physician. A famous writer of the time, contemporary of Miguel de Unamuno and Pío Baroja, Trigo's literary contributions have had an impact beyond his fierce critique of modern society and its dual morality. This relevance can be traced in how suicide is represented by more recent authors that also were novelists and practitioners in Spain, such as Luis Martín-Santos and Carlos Castilla del Pino, among others.

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1 Introduction: Understanding Suicide in the Medical Profession

In the last century, suicide has been one of the leading causes of death in contemporary practitioners around the world. According to relevant studies, physicians, general practitioners, and medical students experience one of the highest professional suicide rates, particularly among anaesthetists, dentists, veterinarians, and psychiatrists (Kalmoe et al., 2019; Mingote Adán, 2014). For example, according to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (2018), in the USA, there are between 300 and 400 deaths by suicide per year among physicians, albeit other studies (Gold et al., 2021) report that there are only around 119 per year. In comparative terms to other professions, this still is a high proportion. Other studies show similar trends in Europe (Duarte et al., 2020; Dutheil et al., 2019), where clearly the risk of dying by suicide in medical professionals has a sensitive impact. This risk would be about twice as high compared to the general population, despite decreases over time in the rates.

On the one hand, these findings are backed by clinical studies that assess an aetiology related to poorly diagnosed and, treatment of, burn-out syndrome and depression (Kalmoe et al., 2019; Pompili et al., 2010). For example, according to a still relevant study in the Netherlands among medical trainees (Van der Heijden et al., 2008), 20.6% showed burnout symptoms, and 12% reported having suicidal thoughts at least once during their residency. On the other hand, more in a qualitative field of analysis, the outstanding research performed by Pamela Wible (2016) shows some more relevant details about the death by suicide in practitioners through the sympathetic analysis of, 1620 suicide notes and letters. One of her main findings suggests that work-related problems, such as sleep deprivation, lack of institutional support, and occupational-efficiency pressures contribute to chronic stress and mental suffering. This highlights the relevance of trying to understand certain aspects of suicide through the testimony of the 'authors', particularly those with a supposed sensibility, and awareness, concerning health-care issues, at least in general terms.

This approach by Pamela Wible connects with the main contribution of the understanding of the so-called suicidal mind by Edwin Shneidman (1998) as one of the "founding fathers" of modern suicidology. As it is well known, Shneidman and his colleagues, particularly Norman Farberow, try to uncover some of the keys or "clues" that lead to suicide (Shneidman & Farberow, 1957), highly related to psychache and hopelessness. According to Shneidman's approach, a way of understanding better the path that leads to suicide death is looking into the steps that an individual takes from ideation to attempt, something that nowadays leading researchers like Rory O'Connor and Olivia Kirtley (2018) try to unveil with the Integrated Motivational-Volitional Model of Suicidal Behaviour (IMV). In the different groundbreaking study of suicide letters, Shneidman delves into the psychological autopsy methodology as a way of reviewing some of the specifics of the deceased and his or her previous mental traits. A particular intensive analysis can be found in *Autopsy of a Suicidal Mind* (Shneidman, 2004), where the death of an

American doctor and lawyer is discussed with other psychological and sociological experts, intertwined with interviews to friends and family. This exercise somehow mirrors with the compared analysis of suicide writers performed by Al Alvarez (1990), where the comprehension of the thoughts, feelings, and context of different authors is heavily reviewed. In this sense, and according to David Lester (2021), studying suicide through literature makes an exercise even more suggestive than in some clinic-based studies. A perfect example of Lester's approach can be found in this volume at Chap. 20. Therefore, this chapter considers these approaches in the analysis of the "suicidal medical mind," where there is a scarcity of studies on the novelization of suicidal behavior by medical authors that died by suicide. Thus, in this chapter, I consider the life and work of Felipe Trigo, a well-known author from the early twentieth century in Spain, first a country doctor and later a military and hospital physician that died by suicide after writing about its possibility in his fiction.

2 Felipe Trigo's *El médico rural* (1912): Another Doorway into the Medical Suicidal Mind

2.1 Life and Work of Felipe Trigo

The understanding of the problem of suicide in health workers can be tackled from a historical point of view which, in terms of comparative literature, can be useful for the understanding of underlying genealogies. In this case, the main analysis of this chapter focuses on the literary work and self-novelization pre-announced death of Felipe Trigo y Sánchez-Mora (1864–1916). The passionate biography of Trigo (Abril, 1917; Guerrero Cabanillas, 2007; Martínez San Martín, 1983) is a tale correspondent with the deep economic, social, and political changes in Spain during the end of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth century. Despite early press collaborations during his student life, especially in Republican and Socialist magazines, Trigo's contributions as a writer fundamentally correspond to the early 1900s, when he started retiring from the medical profession. After a couple of years serving as a country doctor in the Extremadura region from 1887 to 1889, Trigo left his former position to become a military physician at the Cuerpo Militar de Sanidad (Sanitary Corps) in Seville. Although after several destinations as military medic in Burgos, Santander, Granollers (Catalonia), and Trubia (Asturias), in 1895, he volunteered for a position in the Philippine Islands, where he moved with his family. His military destination stationed him at Fuerte Victoria de Calaganán in Mindanao Island, a penal colony where, according to his main biographers, he started to show some of his first mental disorder symptoms intertwined with social resentment and animosity. On the 27th of September, 1896, Trigo was seriously wounded during a Tagalog prisoners' revolt at the fort, his left hand becoming crippled, which he would cover with a glove for the rest of his life.

Laureate with the grade of Lieutenant-Colonel, he returned to Madrid acclaimed as a national hero, although his medical record diagnosed troublesome irascibility, insomnia, and what to be believed as neurasthenia symptoms. Then, as part of the Cuerpo de Inválidos Militares (Disabled Military Corps), in 1899, he was able to retire from military service, settling in Mérida as a practitioner in San Juan de Dios (Saint John of God) Hospital. In 1905, he moved to Madrid with his family, quitting the medical profession and joining the city's active literary and intellectual circles, where he participated at the Ateneo and the Centro Extremeño. In the capital, while supporting his daughters' medical studies, he exclusively dedicated himself to writing press collaborations, tales, novels, and being an active part of the bohemian metropolitan culture until his death by suicide in 1916 at his home in Ciudad Lineal.

In literary terms, Trigo is not a well-known author today, but during his time, he was one of the most outstanding post-naturalist writers of the generation of 1898 (Guerrero Cabanillas, 2017; Muelas Herraiz, 1986; Peña, 1989). He was also one of the main pioneers of erotic fiction in Spain, entangled with the social novel of the French (post)naturalist tradition (Bergasa, 1997; Muelas Herraiz, 1986; Peña, 1989). Trigo was close to Manuel Abril, writer, critic, and an active member of Café Pombo's social gatherings organized by the Modernist poet Ramón Gómez de la Serna. Furthermore, Trigo exchanged correspondence with Miguel de Unamuno, befriended with Emilia Pardo-Bazán, head of the Naturalism literary movement in Spain, and had a troublesome relationship with other authors like Carmen de Burgos, Colombine, or Pío Baroja, who deeply dislike his writings.

In the 1900s, he was compromised by a double celebrity status. On the one hand, novels like *Las ingenuas* (*The Ingenuous*) (1930) and *Jarrapellejos* (1914), best-sellers in his times, or short tales that frequently appeared in the specialized press like *El Cuento Semanal* or *La Novela Corta*, took Trigo to a well-known status in the popular literary world of the moment. In this sense, his work was appraised because of his deep engagement with the principles of Regenerationism, an intellectual movement committed to denouncing political corruption in Spain in the despotic form of "caciquismo." Also, his fierce critique of modern society and its repressive morality towards the freedom and rights of women raised positive critics, albeit he cannot be considered a feminist writer because of relevant bias in gender roles in his works (Guerrero Cabanillas, 2010). But, on the other hand, Trigo's dubious promiscuity and sexual activities in brothels were usually under the scope of moral scandal. Furthermore, due to the erotic content of most of his writings, he was usually labeled as a "pornographic writer," something that contributed to part of his oblivion during times of Franco's dictatorship (1939–1975).

2.2 Insights of Suicidal Behavior in Trigo's Writings

There has been an ardent discussion about the causes and nature of Trigo's suicide. He left a suicide note to his family the day before his death, asking for forgiveness concerning the unending psychological pain he suffered.

This mental suffering has been a great concern in his biography regarding he was "afraid of losing his mind," as it has been said by his relatives and his close friends (Abril, 1917, p. 71). Also, according to other authors (Guerrero Cabanillas, 2007), Trigo's pathobiography indicates a hypersensitive nature and character that was part of a long and poorly diagnosed mental illness. The frequent nervous crisis, associated to bipolar disorder or neurasthenia, could therefore have deeply affected his errant mood, life, and career. This unclarified discussion opens the door to speculate how deep a mental affection could have affected his life and how much he was not driven to psychache by his context, concretely the social and professional pressures during his career that awakened a particular "suicidal mind." This can be traced in his late novels, where Trigo talks openly about suicide through characters that are, in fact, doppelgangers, alter egos, and mirrors of his experience as a physician. For example, his last novel, *Miss Keis* (1916a), written two months before his suicide, the main character, an artist, kills herself after a psychological breakdown, horrified with the perspective of being interned in a mental institution. Furthermore, in *En la carrera* (*In the Career*) (2003), *El médico rural* (*The Country Doctor*) (1978), and in the posthumous novel, *Sí sé por qué* (*I Do Know Why*) (1916b), Trigo writes about stark episodes where the main character thinks and feels impelled to suicide. In fact, according to one of his biographers, *Sí sé por qué* (1916b) appears what happened to be the first attempt of suicide on a trip in 1911 to Buenos Aires:

> Me, a gravely-ill person who will not return from Buenos Aires either—if I get there. Will I throw myself into the sea before?... Who knows! Death is seductive for those who contemplate existence in their sad truth. I was unaware the hope of dying contained such charm. […] Everything is sinister to me, and this departure even more so. When leaving one's homeland, emotion brings tears to the hearts and eyes of many, for the mother or the beloved or the friend being left behind. In my arid life, nothing can move me. […] I close my eyes, because I suffer the sudden regret of the unjust rigor to which I am prone. […] I go back to the cabin. Alas! I'm not interested in anything around me, so picturesque! (Trigo, 1916b, p. 9)

Moreover, in the same novel, and as a dark omen concerning his inner suffering, he states: "Should it be a condition of life, then, to live beastly and cruelly, or not to live, by mystical suicide?" (1916b, p. 57). Nevertheless, looking into earlier works, in his first novel, *Las ingenuas* (1930), the main character, Luciano, a doppelganger of Trigo's colonial adventure, has a recurrent attraction to dying as feeling miserable and hopeless in a hostile social environment. But it is in *En la carrera* (2003) where Trigo talks about the experiences of a medical student in late nineteenth-century Madrid. Here, some obscured passages can be found concerning what can be an ambivalence attitude towards death. For example, being in deep distress for the professional pressures in his training, and also feeling extremely tormented because his stressful social and sexual relationships, Esteban, an aspirant practitioner, feels attracted to a suicide hotspot:

> Ah, the famous Viaduct! With its cyclopean height. Below, Segovia Street. Esteban was receiving many different impressions in Madrid. How many people would have put an end to their lives here! He looked at the height and imagined a woman falling, a worker in mourning, head down, through the air, with her clothes flying in the air, and her tiny feet

> pressed together... It was a picture from a novel he had read. […] To see how long it would take for the suicide victim to fall, they threw a crumpled copy of El Heraldo newspaper... Two officers immediately approached, always in the vicinity on the lookout to prevent suicides. Furthermore, the friends told Esteban that years ago a supplementary railing had been added to raise the existing one. They commented on the horrible effect of a skull crashing down on the pavement, and that of a passerby down there who could see something plummeting down from the sky that was going to fall on top of him. And, once the tragic emotion had calmed down, Esteban looked straight ahead. (Trigo, 2003, pp. 28–29)

Furthermore, in another moment of deep distress towards the end of the novel, after a colleague's suicide in Cádiz, the young medical student has quite a vivid and raw image of his own death: "The shadow of a bullet, with the horrible taste of destruction, passed through his brain. He trembled. Among the conflicts of frightful impossibility in which the world had placed him, it was perhaps the great solution" (Trigo, 2003, p. 279). This rough vividness, probably because of his strong imagination entangled with his medical and surgery expertise, is strengthened moreover in the novel that makes the second part of *En la carrera* (2003): *El médico rural* (1978). Here, after finishing his medical studies in Seville and marrying Jacinta, we find Esteban taking up his country doctor position in Palomas, a fictional and extremely poor village in inner Andalusia. There, Esteban has more frequent suicidal thoughts, even an impulsive attempt in which a clear visualization persists of what would be Trigo's real-life suicide:

> He threw the cigar away and at the wave of his arm the shotgun came to him. He considered it. He felt that visceral shiver triggered by any desperate resolution. His hand clamped the gun, his temple resting on the barrel. He thought he could take off a boot, tie the rubber of the case to his toe and the trigger of the gun, put his beard on the barrel muzzle ..., and ... sleep, sleep ..., tire of sleeping in an eternal rest! But he remained motionless, there, beside the rock ..., the sun had already set, the unhappy man tempering the fires of his fever with the cold air and the nightfall rain. (Trigo, 1978, p. 60)

This episode not only intertwines with Trigo's death in 1916 by a gunshot in the head in his office at home, but also in the novel, another character can be found that commits suicide in a way similar to Trigo. In fact, Trigo's death occurred after what his relatives and friends considered to be strange and joyful party days (Abril, 1917) in which he was working on *Sí sé por qué* (1916b) novel. Thus, in the novel *El médico rural* (1978), Cascabel, an eccentric man, owner of a ruinous business and with an artistic and traveller past, invites the whole town of Palomas to a lavish party, shooting himself the following morning:

> As soon as dawn broke, Cascabel confronted the first laborer who passed by his door and told him, making him laugh: 'Hey, you, Relincha, go and warn the judge that I'm going to shoot myself twice in the middle of my head'. He went inside and did it all in one go, as it was a double-barreled pistol. His skull had been shattered; his brains splattered over the ceiling, against the hook from which he had taken down the last beautiful spicy sausage. (Trigo, 1978, pp. 199–200)

These passages clearly speak not only about impulses towards a vivid suicide but also an inclination to two distinct methods of dying. It is highly relevant that throwing himself into the void or into the sea, as it happens in *Las ingenuas* (1930), *En la*

carrera (2003), or *Sí sé por qué* (1916b), is something quite different to shooting himself, more cold-blooded and meticulous according to key suicide research where a premeditated suicide plan is extremely relevant in the risk of a highly lethal attempt. In fact, we can talk here about what Shneidman (1998) considers to be relevant indicators of psychache according to the scale in which several variables can be found in accordance with mounting and unending psychological pain. Moreover, the hopelessness attached to the psychache of a suicidal mind is quite present in most of Trigo's novels, where misery and despair episodes are usually confronted by Trigo's alter egos. For example, in *El médico rural* (1978, p. 4), Esteban, while arriving at the village of Palomas, thinks himself at the bottom of a miserable life: "They knew they were alone in the world, in this cruel world, abandoned to themselves, left to their own means. Seville, very far away now, appeared in their minds like a glimmering merciless hell." Plus, the grim descriptions of the place have a dark layer, describing a land of hopelessness, suffering, and death:

> Sad, very sad, Esteban was approaching the village, a kind of hell whose arid ugliness contained utter filth and ignorance. He was already crossing the belt of dunghills, and from a shanty hovel an anemic woman told him, as dismal as the mud of the broken walls around her that looked like filthy graves. […] He was devastated, measuring his affliction with the idea that even if this Palomas was horrible, detestable as he was, he was even worse as a doctor. Unworthy and unfit to practice here, he felt totally disqualified to practice anywhere. (Trigo, 1978, p. 35)

These quite Romantic passages, in which feelings are mirrored in physical landscapes, intertwine with what in the case of Esteban is the pressure of not being a good doctor at all. In *En la carrera* (2003), this appears several times as an anxiety of the medical trainee in achieving this status. Plus, this is worsened by the burdens of the medical profession, usually dealing with other's sufferings and occasional death. Later on, with a relevant frequency in *El médico rural* (1978), Esteban finds his work stressful and his knowledge even useless for treating the sick. Therefore, he feels like a con man in his own profession, which leads him to great despair:

> A doctor, according to an official certificate, he was not even fit to practice in the remotest miserable village; and being no more than a doctor, in other words, that which the indisputable reality categorically proved he was not, much less here or anywhere else could he learn a new trade. […] To him, his launching of Palomas meant the launching of the whole world and life. He closed his eyes for a moment, so as not to see himself alone in the dauntless fields of impiety. With this thought hanging in his mind, Esteban walked, and walked...; as if he would never have anything else to do than walk, aimlessly and relentlessly. […] He kept on walking, weak in spirit and matter, with the shotgun resting heavily on his shoulder, the weight of the gloomy and threatening universe on his forehead. (Trigo, 1978, p. 57)

In fact, he previously starts thinking of his own death and even announcing the method:

> and, immersed in the impotence of not even being able to support his wife and son, that impulse to turn his miserable house into a refuge of piety appeared to him like mocking sarcasm and folly… oh! He looked at the books, the useless books lying on the shelf, as further cruel sarcasm, and near them spotted the shotgun; a spasm ran through him: the only worthy solution, perhaps, would be to kill himself! (Trigo, 1978, p. 54)

2.3 *Trigo's Suicidal Mind and Other Deaths by Suicide in Spanish Fiction Medical Authors*

According to some of his biographers (Guerrero Cabanillas, 2007; Martínez San Martín, 1983), the posthumous novel *Sí sé por qué* (1916b) appears what happened to be Trigo's first attempt of suicide on a trip in Buenos Aires in 1911, despite the early apparition of suicidal thoughts in his work. Moreover, it is stated that Trigo was a "sick man" (Abril, 1917, p. 55) but a psychopathological genius and creator (Guerrero Cabanillas, 2007). Nevertheless, as it can be seen, the vividness of his suicide and self-novelization speaks loud about not only his psychological suffering and mental malady, to have bipolar disorder or neurasthenia, but also about the pressures of the social context. In the end, his works can be considered accurate autobiographical fictions, where the main characters are all into the medical profession. Both in *En la carrera* (2003) and *El médico rural* (1978), we see that suicide ideation and the attempt occur when the main character, Esteban, feels a particular social and professional pressure that takes him into insomnia episodes that boosts depressive mood. So, even before Trigo became obsessed with his own mental disorder, suicide ideation has been in his life even before the hypothetical apparition of the first symptoms in the Philippines. Furthermore, this state of his could have been somehow triggered by a post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) following the prisoners' attack that left not only his hand scarred but also his "soul." Therefore, this highlights the relevant matter of looking into the extended biography instead of only the psychological details and traits of the author, taking into account the relevancy of understanding suicidal behavior in stressful contexts. This is what some sociologists (Fincham et al., 2011) claim to be extremely important in the development of "sociological autopsies" of suicide, as we can find in the previous Chap. 4, by Rashmi Joshi.

In addition, following Trigo's death, there have been several guesses about the real cause of his suicide, if it was more existential than related to his mental disorders, considering the outbreak and fatality of World War I or even an unconfirmed STD or sexually transmitted disease (Guerrero Cabanillas, 2007). But it can be traced that in his career as a physician, he was deeply dissatisfied and felt a pressure that, in the end, led him to abandon the medical profession quite early. This insight about his "medical suicide mind" is quite similar to what can be seen in other authors in Spain that were also practitioners and wrote about suicide in physicians in their fictions. For example, the nearby case of Pío Baroja's *El árbol de la ciencia* (*The Tree of Knowledge*) (1928) finds echoing distress in the position of Andrés Hurtado, a medical student in Northern Spain. The bitterness, the lack of resources to adequately treat poor and miserable villagers, and the social pressure felt by the main character leads him to strong suicide ideation, similar to Trigo's Esteban. Also, there is a thread that connects these novels with Miguel de Unamuno's works, usually set in rural environments where the oppressive society intertwines with existential problems that border suicidal behavior by liberal professionals (Gutiérrez Simón, 2021), but this takes us a bit away from the main discussion. In fact, later

Spanish medical authors like Luis Martín-Santos and Carlos Castilla del Pino have a strong resemblance in what could be Trigo's distressful experience as a practitioner. Both relevant psychiatrists, Martín-Santos' novel, *Tiempo de silencio* (*Time of Silence*) (1962), and Castilla del Pino's *Discurso de Onofre* (*Onofre's Discourse*) (1999), wrote about suicidal behavior in the context of their profession. For instance, in *Tiempo de silencio* (1989), a failed medical researcher, later a country doctor, describes an oppressive social atmosphere and a depressive mood of the main character, affected with burnout symptoms. Moreover, in *Discurso de Onofre* (1977), Castilla del Pino writes about a country doctor that dies by suicide in Andalusia and leaves several notes that talk about the suffocating implications of his work and the despair, hate, and contempt he felt while trying his best. Therefore, we can see that Trigo's work perfectly echoes in describing both the social and professional situation of physicians in Spain, particularly in rural areas.

3 Conclusions

Trigo's work is a doorway into a better understanding of the psychological and sociological variables that can partly explain the trait of the "medical suicide mind." This literary connection with other relevant research, as that carried out by Pamela Wible (2016), broadens the clarification of the thoughts and feelings of medical workers that die by suicide. As it can be highlighted, the main problem in suicidal practitioners usually consists of how they are pushed to the limit within their working conditions in their social context, especially with mental health issues in their background not being adequately attended. Therefore, it can be said that a lack of institutional support, translated into limited material and psychological resources, entangled with troublesome situations, patients, medical recording, burdensome paperwork, etc., end in a great distress for health-care professionals. Also, we see that burnout syndrome has a triggering effect in emotional exhaustion and sleep deprivation, which could lead to suicidal behavior through the door of severe depression. This, once more, talks about the importance of context in addressing the suicidal mind, especially in professions that fall behind the line of the political and labor recognition of suicide risk in sociological and historical terms.

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Chapter 6
The Problem of Suicide in Kafka: An Ethical or Aesthetical Problem?

Fabio Bartoli

In a letter, Kafka told his best friend Max Brod that he had spent the whole night between the 7th and 8th of October, 1912, thinking about his suicide. He justified these thoughts in the despair caused by the new job that his father had tried to impose on him in the family factory. Kafka's exasperation came from the implicit obligation of leaving his literary activity in the event of accepting the new job. This would have implied abandoning "his essence," which was how he defined literary activity. Regarding the choice between the aesthetical lifestyle or the ethical one, Kafka struggled to decide between killing himself and continuing his literary activity. Fortunately, Max Brod convinced Kafka's family to withdraw the offer for the well-being of their son, so that he could continue his literary activity. Through the analysis of Kafka's diary and letters, the aim of this chapter is to analyze the conflict between the ethical and the aesthetical lifestyle in Kafka's social context. In doing so, I will propose an interpretation to understand the episode of Kafka's "almost" suicide in relation with the conception he had of his literary activity and with Durkheim's theory presented in his book *Suicide*.

1 Introduction

During his life, Franz Kafka often meditated on suicide;[1] nevertheless, this topic has not been studied in depth by scholars. Indeed, in my research, I was able to find only a few marginal mentions of this matter in texts in which the issue of suicide is not

[1] For Kafka's biographic information, I will consult Stach (2002).

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the main point of the study (see, e.g., Janín, 2009; Karaman, 2017; Nucette Ríos, 1986; Shulman, 1998; Sokel, 1976). Moreover, it lacks a philosophical perspective in the analysis. Accordingly, the existential reasons Kafka had for thinking about committing suicide in relation with his social context have not been sufficiently explored. It would be extremely interesting to increase awareness about these issues to stress the divergence between social and individual perspectives.

Then, the aim of this chapter is to analyze the suicidal thoughts that Kafka expressed in a letter to Max Brod and evaluate the incidence that his literary activity had on them. Specifically, I affirm that Kafka's suicidal thoughts had an aesthetical motive and not an ethical one.[2]

I will develop my analysis in relation with Durkheim's theory presented in his book *Suicide* (2002), which is essential for understanding the problem of suicide in Kafka's period (Mueller et al., 2021). In fact, the French sociologist wrote that book approximately in the same period in which Kafka conceived his suicidal thoughts, the first two decades of the twentieth century. Even if Durkheim's essay describes a period prior to the moment in which Kafka wrote about suicide, the results of his analysis about the end of the nineteenth century can also be applied to Kafka's age because there is not a breaking point in the European social context, as Hobsbawm (1995) underlines.

Regarding the methodology, I will focus the study on the analysis of two documents that Kafka wrote in 1912: the first one is a letter in which he writes about committing suicide and explains his motivations; the second one is a diary entry in which he describes his existential priorities. As I will demonstrate, his suicide motivations are linked with the impossibility of performing those priorities. In addition, Kafka's situation in 1912 could be considered paradigmatic to understand the problem that the contradiction between aesthetical and ethical lifestyles represented for him during his life. In the letter I will analyze, Kafka exposes all the nuances that this contradiction implied for him. Even if I am not the first scholar to analyze this topic, I did not find scientific works that connected the events of 1912 to the tension between the aesthetical and ethical lifestyle in Kafka's existence. For example, de la Rica (2009) considered the same episode, but he develops his reflection in connection with the literary production of the Czech author, in particular *Die Verwandlung*, and not in relation with his own experience.

Accordingly, this chapter will be divided into four sections. Firstly, based on Durkheim's work on suicide, I will introduce some short considerations about the problem of suicide in Kafka's age. Secondly, I will focus on the life of Kafka during the year 1912, when he expressed his intentions of committing suicide by analyzing

[2] According to Centrone (2015), I will use the terms "ethical," "moral," and its derivations as synonymous. I must specify that when I use the word "aesthetical" in this chapter, I want to denote the semantic sphere in relation with the artistic life. More precisely, "aesthetical" is opposite to "ethical" because the first one indicates a situation in which art occupies the most important place in the scheme of values of the subject. On the contrary, the second one indicates a situation in which the moral values, which every society imposes, occupy the most important place for the individual. I will discuss this contrast in my chapter.

a letter to Max Brod. Thirdly, I will integrate the results of this research by considering a diary entry of the same year that is pertinent for understanding the aesthetical reasons Kafka had for finishing his life. Finally, I will draw some conclusions in which I will point out the results of my analysis and I will use them for making some considerations regarding Durkheim's theory on suicide and for stressing the relevance that Kafka's experience could have for understanding the problem of suicide in the contemporary age.

2 Suicide in Kafka's Age: Only an Ethical Problem?

2.1 Durkheim's Theoretical Frame to Classify the Types of Suicide

Durkheim offers the first and most important study in history about the phenomenon of suicide in relation with the social context of the individual (Janín, 2009). Durkheim's approach is based on the consideration that the number of suicides in a particular social context is determined by the social characteristics of such background. In other words, to understand the trend of the number of suicides is imperative to comprehend which kind of society produces it. As a result, he asserts that the cases of suicide increase in a society in the midst of a moral crisis (Durkheim, 2002). In this specific situation, the society, which is the "supreme moral order of existence" (Durkheim, 2002, p. 274), develops the adequate circumstances for stimulating the highest-risk subjects to commit suicide.

According to Durkheim, we can identify three categories of suicide depending on whether the subject commits suicide: a) due to their empathic isolation and disengagement from society, namely, *egoistic suicide*; b) considering that their death will profit society, namely, *altruistic suicide*; or c) because they suffered a trauma, namely, *anomic suicide*. From this classification, it is possible to see the intrinsic link that Durkheim identifies in the period described and shared by Kafka, between the problem of suicide and the moral sphere of society and, afterward, individuality.[3]

In line with the purpose of the chapter, the next passage will aim to understand in which of these three categories it would be correct to locate Kafka's case.

[3] For example, Durkheim (2002) considered that suicide was an *amoral* action against society. With this example, we can appreciate the dual perspective of the morality of suicide in Durkheim's theory: suicide is an amoral action against the individual and society. On the contrary, today to consider suicide an amoral action is more difficult. We can find an example of this tendency in Critchley's book *Notes on Suicide* (2015).

2.2 Which Kind of Suicide Did Kafka Think About?

To answer this question, it is relevant to share some information about Kafka's life in 1912 and then to read the letter in which Kafka expresses his suicidal thoughts.

To put the reader in context, Kafka's family, with a great economic investment and with Kafka's consent, opened an amianthus factory in the last period of 1911. The accord was that Kafka's brother-in-law would be the active partner, while Kafka would remain a silent partner, with the possibility of changing his position at any time. However, Kafka lost interest in the factory almost immediately and stopped visiting it. He commissioned his brother-in-law to manage the business without supervision. This decision caused in Kafka a big sense of guilt for failing to meet his family's expectations and, subsequently, provoked many suicidal thoughts in him for weeks. In addition, business at the factory was so bad, to the point that Kafka had to ask his uncle for a loan in the first months of factory activity. During this period, he wrote the following lines to his best friend Max Brod:

> [Prague, October 7, 1912]
>
> My dearest Max,
>
> After writing well Sunday night—I could have written all through the night and the day and the night and the day, and finally have flown away, and could certainly have written well today also—one page, really just an exhalation of yesterday's ten, is actually finished—I had to stop for the following reason: My brother-in-law, the manufacturer, this morning left for a business trip which is going to take from ten to fourteen days. (In my happy distraction I had scarcely noticed that this was impending.) […] Recently, when I told you that nothing coming from outside could disturb my writing now (that, of course, was not so much boasting as an attempt to comfort myself), I was thinking only of how my mother whimpers to me almost every evening that I really should look in on the factory now and then to reassure Father, and of how my father has also said it to me much more strongly by looks and in other roundabout ways. In large part such pleas and reproofs were not without a certain rationale, for supervising Brother-in-law would certainly do him and the factory a great deal of good; except that I—and herein lay the irreducible irrationality of such talk—cannot perform any such supervision, even in my clearest states of mind. For the next two weeks, however, that is not what is really involved. For this period, no more really is needed than any pair of eyes going about the factory, and even mine will do. There cannot be the slightest objection to this demand's being directed to me in particular, for in everybody's opinion I bear the chief blame for the establishment of the factory—though I must have assumed this blame in a dream—and in addition there is no one else around who could look into the factory […]. This evening, therefore, when my mother once again began with the old lament and, aside from blaming me for my father's bitterness and sickness, also brought up this new argument about Brother-in-law's departure and the orphaned state of the factory, and my youngest sister, who ordinarily sides with me, correctly sensing the change of feeling that I have recently had on this subject, and simultaneously displaying monstrous obtuseness, deserted me in my confrontation with Mother, and while bitterness—I don't know whether it was only gall—passed through my whole body—I realized with perfect clarity that now only two possibilities remain open to me, either to jump out of the window once everyone has gone to sleep, or in the next two weeks to go daily to the factory and to my brother-in-law's office. The first would provide me with the opportunity of shedding all responsibility, both for the disturbance of my writing and for the orphaned factory. The second would absolutely interrupt my writing—I cannot simply wipe from my eyes the sleep of fourteen nights—and would leave me, if I had enough strength of will and of hope,

> the prospect of possibly beginning again, in two weeks, where I left off today. So I did not jump, and the temptations to make this a farewell letter (my ideas for it take another direction) are not very strong. I stood for a long time at the window and pressed against the pane, and there were many moments when it would have suited me to alarm the toll collector on the bridge by my fall. But all the while I really felt too firm to let the decision to smash myself to pieces on the pavement penetrate to the proper decisive depth. It also seemed to me that my staying alive interrupts my writing less than death—even if I can speak only, only of interruption—and that between the beginning of the novel and its continuation in two weeks somehow, in the factory especially and especially in relationship to my satisfied parents, I shall move and have my being within the innermost spaces of my novel. Dearest Max, I am putting this whole thing before you not for your opinion, for of course you could have no opinion of it, but since I was firmly determined to jump without leaving a farewell letter—before the end one has a right to be just tired—I wanted, since I am about to step back into my room as its occupant, to write you instead a long letter of reunion, and here it is. And now just a kiss and goodnight, so that tomorrow I am a factory boss, as they demand. (Kafka, 1977, pp. 193–199)

Thanks to this document, it is possible to know the reasons that triggered Kafka's suicidal thoughts. He is desperate, because his family is pressing him to work in their factory for two weeks. His brother-in-law is not able to supervise the employees due to a trip. According to Kafka, this job assignment conflicts intensely with his literary activity. To execute it, he will be forced to completely stop his literary production for the entire two weeks that the brother-in-law will be away. In Kafka's opinion, this perspective is unacceptable, and it is sufficient to justify the contemplation of possible suicide. In short, for Kafka, this possibility is sparked by the traumatic idea of working for two weeks in his factory to the detriment of his literary activity.

With these elements, Kafka's case must be classified under Durkheim's anomic suicide category. In fact, in Durkheim's words, this type of suicide "results from man's activity's lacking regulation and his consequent sufferings. […] In anomic suicide, society's influence is lacking in the basically individual passions, thus leaving them without a check-rein" (2002, p. 219). As can be seen from Kafka's letter, his case could be understood under the former description, because the scene revolves around Kafka's individual desperation resulting from his job in the factory.

However, it is important to underline that my categorization of Kafka's case as, in Durkheim's terms, anomic suicide is appropriate, but, at the same time, it is reductive. In fact, it is true that there is no *moral norm* that regulates Kafka's *pathos* related with his trauma. In this sense, it is anomic. However, this does not imply the absolute inexistence of a norm, which may have a nature other than purely ethical. In my opinion, Kafka's case is situated just in this blind spot, because we can justify his suicidal intentions from an aesthetical perspective, instead of an ethical one. To do this, I must renounce Durkheim's analysis on suicide since, according to Macho, Durkheim's schema "was conceived for the analysis of the social systems, but it lacks aesthetical criteria" (2017, p. 360).

Therefore, the analysis of Kafka's letter is useful for highlighting the aesthetical reasons that are behind his suicidal thoughts to integrate Durkheim's theory with another point of view: the aesthetical one. If I am right, I will try to demonstrate that Kafka's case is an example in which the logic of suicide is not the absence of

regulation for controlling the feelings of the individual. In contrast, it is a situation in which society decides not to recognize the legitimacy of the aesthetical norms that govern these circumstances since it is structured only by ethical norms. In other words, we must consider instances like Kafka's one as ethically anomic but also as aesthetically regulate. I will try to establish in the next sections of this work the aesthetical reasons of Kafka's quasi-suicide and, subsequently, that in his case, the ethical and aesthetical logics are not only different but contradict each other.

3 Kafka's Aesthetical Reasons for Thinking About Committing Suicide

The aesthetical reasons for Kafka's quasi-suicide can be summarized into a common root, specifically *the impossibility of writing*. To put it differently, as it can be read at the beginning of the letter above, Kafka's trauma stemmed from his family forcing him to work for two weeks in their factory. This would have implied stopping his literary activity for 14 days, because he would not be able to write and work in the factory at the same time. I must clarify that during this period, Kafka had another permanent job as an employee in a public institution, but only part-time, in the morning. Then, the work at the factory would occupy the free time of the day that Kafka normally dedicated to sleeping, so he could write during the night.

It is important to remember that, according to Kafka, his literary activity was not insignificant, but rather the most important part of his life. In fact, it is normal to find in his papers affirmations like: "I am nothing but literature, and can and want to be nothing else, my job will never take possession of me, it may, however, shatter me completely, and this is by no means a remote possibility" (Kafka, 1976, p. 441) or "I have not literary interests, but am made of literature, I am nothing else, and cannot be anything else" (Kafka, 1973, p. 431). Then, to drown his literary activity would have implied repressing his strongest impulse. In essence, it would be a negation of his own existential nature.

In fact, considering this scenario, he canvassed two possibilities: "to jump out of the window" or "to go daily to the factory." We can express that this tragic situation is a dichotomy between an ethical decision, working in the factory, and an esthetical decision, committing suicide due to the desperation caused by the impossibility of writing.

Afterward, Kafka analyzed the consequences of the two options that he had considered. In the case of suicide, the effect would be Kafka having "the opportunity of shedding all responsibilities," both to write and to work. Then, to commit suicide is an action that implies to renounce to the sense of responsibility toward society. However, it is important to underline that the responsibility of working is an alien imposition, while the responsibility of writing is a personal decision. Therefore, only the second one could be understood as a positive responsibility for Kafka. Thanks to it, he could attain a kind of self-realization that would have been impossible if he had had to work in the factory.

On the other hand, going to work would imply interrupting his literary activity only for two weeks, instead of eternally, like death would mean. In addition, he would have the chance to endure the job in the factory thanks to the perspective that, at the end of the period, he would be able to "begin [writing] again." To put it differently, the sacrifice of working in a factory made sense only in relation with the literary activity. Finally, it is possible to affirm that the two motivating factors Kafka shows *pro* and *contra* suicide are strictly linked with his literary activity; thus, they have an aesthetical nature.

According to this analysis, if Kafka had to respond to Camus' question on "whether life is or is not worth living" (1991, p. 4), he would have responded that his life is only worth living in the literary outline, that is to say, in an aesthetical framework. Provided the individual can be literature, he has a reason to continue living. In fact, we can see evidence of Kafka's position, in the final part of his life. He caught a mortal disease, tuberculosis, but he did not consider committing suicide, because even if his illness had no cure, he was still able to continue writing, so his life was worth living (Bartoli, 2021a).

In conclusion, undoubtedly Kafka's suicidal thoughts have an aesthetical nature. Therefore, it is interesting to consider the importance of society's influence in this context for understanding the contradiction that in Kafka's case is represented by the ethical and the aesthetical points of view relating to Durkheim's classification.

4 Contradiction Between the Ethical and Aesthetical Points of View

For understanding this contradiction, it is useful to reformulate Kafka's dilemma into other terms: he must decide between the productivity that the work in the factory represents to his family and the uselessness that the literary activity represents to them. It is important to underline that, in his social context, the standard for knowing the difference between a useful or useless activity is determined, respectively, by the capacity to make money or not (Bartoli, 2021b).

Even if this was the perception that his society and family tried to impose on him, it is possible to affirm that Kafka had an opposite perception about which activity was productive and which one was not. In fact, a few months before, precisely on 3rd of January, he had written about the topic of productivity in the following terms:

> It is easy to recognize a concentration in me of all my forces on writing. When it became clear in my organism that writing was the most productive direction for my being to take, everything rushed in that direction and left empty all those abilities which were directed towards the joys of sex, eating, drinking, philosophical reflection, and above all music. I atrophied in all these directions. This was necessary because the totality of my strengths was so slight that only collectively could they even half-way serve the purpose of my writing. Naturally, I did not find this purpose independently and consciously, it found itself, and is now interfered with only by the office, but that interferes with it completely. In any case I shouldn't complain that I can't put up with a sweetheart, that I understand almost exactly as much of love as I do of music and have to resign myself to the most superficial efforts I

> may pick up, that on New Year's Eve I dined on parsnips and spinach, washed down with a glass of Ceres, and that on Sunday I was unable to take part in Max's lecture on his philosophical work – the compensation for all this is clear as day. My development is now complete and, so far as I can see, there is nothing left to sacrifice; I need only throw my work in the office out of this complex in order to begin my real life in which, with the progress of my work, my face will finally be able to age in a natural way. (Kafka, 1976, pp. 312–313)

In this entry of the same year,[4] we can read that his perspective about his productivity is literally the opposite of the conception of his social and familiar context. In effect, Kafka expressed that writing is his real productive side because it is the only activity in which his personality can produce something useful. Also, literature is so demanding that it fully absorbs Kafka's energies. In his life, there is no space for anything that is not literature.

In line with this point of view, Kafka posed the option of quitting any social activity and especially his job to have the opportunity to dedicate himself totally to writing. By way of explanation, Kafka would renounce to the pillars of the modern bourgeois society, namely, job and community life, because they are in contradiction with his productive side: literature.[5] That is, he is choosing productivity instead of inactivity.

It is essential to emphasize that in this scenario, we can see the intrinsic contradiction between the ethical and aesthetical perspectives. In fact, even if both have productivity as their final goal, Kafka's society, which is controlled by ethical regulations, does not recognize aesthetical productivity as it is not contemplated in its scheme of values, because literature does not generate money.[6]

However, Kafka did not have to take a real decision about this dichotomy. Indeed, the day after Max Brod received the letter with his suicidal intentions, he determined to rescue his friend from this tragic situation. Immediately, he wrote to Kafka's mother and asked her to intercede with her husband for his son, he suggested requesting for him not to obligate Kafka to work in the factory. Omitting the topic of suicide to her partner and driven by the fear of her son's death, she was able to fix the situation convincing Kafka's father to relieve him of the work in the family's business.

At the end of this situation, it is possible to appreciate the typical Kafka immobilism in the circumstances in which he is facing a difficult decision: he used to wait for alien help instead of trying to do something by himself (Bartoli, 2022). Providentially, Kafka was able to take advantage of a support network that often

[4] Considering that Kafka wrote this entry in the same year that he wrote the letter to Brod, which I analyzed above, plausibly he maintained his opinion about work and literature in both cases.

[5] See Brombert (2012), who stresses Flaubert's influence on Kafka's position about literature. It is important to point out that in 1913, Kafka begins to read Kierkegaard's work, especially the books under pseudonym, and he was another author that had a strong influence in Kafka's conception about the relation between an aesthetical and an ethical life (Bartoli, 2020, 2022).

[6] Regarding the relation between poverty and literature, see Brisette (2005).

makes the difference between a quasi-suicide and a suicide. It is not coincidental that the person able to understand better the situation was precisely his best friend Max Brod, a writer that—like Kafka—put literature, then the aesthetical lifestyle, at the center of his life. Afterward, thanks to this help, Kafka did not have to work in the factory for even a day, and he did not have to renounce to his essence, literature. That is, his life was still worth living.

In any case, the events that I studied offer sufficient elements to be able to draw some conclusions regarding the theme of the chapter.

5 Conclusions

In conclusion, considering Kafka's quasi-suicide, thanks to my analysis, we can affirm that he thought about committing suicide, because society's ethical regulation obligated him to stop his productivity, for doing an activity that, in his mind, would be totally useless.

Accordingly, my categorization of Kafka's case as, in Durkheim's terms, anomic suicide is not completely appropriate because the trauma that Kafka suffered was produced strictly by the ethical norms that regulated his social context. Moreover, their presence produced the sense of desperation that also affected him after the trauma. In fact, if this kind of moral rules was less "present" in the life of every member of society, he would have had the possibility of ignoring them, instead of resigning himself to accepting them.

Finally, it is evident that in Kafka's case, we are faced with the situation in which the ethical motivations contradict the aesthetical reasons for committing suicide. Hither, I found an inefficiency in Durkheim's theory: confirming Macho's assessment, Durkheim did not consider the aesthetical reasons that committing suicide could represent, as Kafka's case demonstrates. The original theory is, at least, incomplete, because it considers some kinds of suicide as having no underlying reasons, when in fact they do follow a logic which is not contemplated in the theory, in this case, aesthetical motivations.

On one side, we can interpret this deficiency as a sign of the positivistic atmosphere that ruled in Kafka and Durkheim's age, which is one of the bases of Durkheim's sociological theory. Consequently, it is also the cornerstone of his suicide's categorization. Specifically, this period was marked by an accentuated disdain for the aesthetical life, which was often reduced to mere aestheticism, in favor of the bourgeois moral values that we have sketched out above.

On the other hand, it is interesting to underscore that the social moral judgement against suicide is not strictly an old problem, like Durkheim shows, but it is still current. In fact, this kind of moral judgement still affects the suicidal practice in our age. This explains the deregistration of numerous suicide cases as such, which are frequently registered as incidents due to the shame that society's moral values assign to suicide (Cohen Agrest, 2007). In addition, the aesthetical reasons for committing

suicide have not been considered as relevant, valid, or justified motivations in the social perception about this problem.

Then, Kafka's case shows us how a philosophical approach to the questions concerning suicide and its motivations is still lacking (Herrera, 2022). This perspective could be fundamental for better understanding this problem, which is so complex that it is necessary to involve every possible analytic instrument, especially humanities. This could allow to bring back the human dimension that we are losing by virtue of the depersonalization of the death process which is taking place today.

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Chapter 7
The Tragedy of Vladimir Mayakovsky: Suicide as a Dialectical Dilemma

Mary Elisabeth Elliott

The suicide of Vladimir Mayakovsky in April 1930 reverberated through the Soviet literary world. Endless attempts were made by the government, his contemporaries, and friends to explain away his suicide as an explicable, personally motivated event. In this examination, Mayakovsky's suicide is considered from a philosophical perspective as the inevitable outcome of the influence of external forces on the dialectical progression of his work and his life. By scouring not only Mayakovsky's own work but accounts of his friends, colleagues, and scholars, both contemporary and past, it is possible to understand Mayakovsky's life as a perpetual master-slave dialectic in which the poet works at the labor of his art for his overlord, the object of the poet's unrequited love. This approach to understanding Mayakovsky's suicide not only elucidates the ways in which analyses of his demise have been erroneously essentialized but also how unrequited love functions as a dialectical system.

1 Introduction

The injunction against conflating the author and the narrative is an acknowledged and universally respected tenant of literary studies. However, in the case of an author like Vladimir Mayakovsky, whose work is openly and vividly autobiographical, such an injunction can create false polarities in the understanding of the writer's works. Many, including his contemporaries and friends, have openly acknowledged the autobiographical nature of Mayakovsky's work. As one such friend, Roman Jakobson, wrote,

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> [i]t was Majakovskij [sic] who wrote that even a poet's style of dress, even his intimate conversations with his wife, should be determined by the whole of his poetic production. He understood very well the close connection between poetry and life. (1987, p. 291)

Given this consideration, to understand the dialectical nature of Mayakovsky's work, it is necessary to understand his life, and vice versa. The following examination not only brings insight into both his texts and his lived experiences as an avant-garde artist in the early decades of the Soviet Union but also allows for an as-yet unexplored explanation for his death. John Berger rightly asserted in *The Sense of Sight* that:

> When a man in good health commits suicide it is, finally, because there is no one who understands him. After his death, the incomprehension often continues because the living insist on interpreting and using his story to suit their own purposes. In this way the ultimate protest against incomprehension goes unheard after all. If we wish to understand the meaning of Mayakovsky's example – and it is an example central to any thinking about the relation between revolution and poetry – we have to work on that meaning. A meaning embodied both in his poetry and in the destiny of his life, *and death*. (1985, p. 226, my emphasis)

It is the aim of this chapter to examine Mayakovsky's death by suicide as an expression of dialectical stagnation while simultaneously proffering an as-yet underexplored application of Hegel's master-slave dialectic in one of the most innately unequal relationships that can be experienced by any human being: unrequited love.

2 Unrequited Love as a Master-Slave Dialectic

Vladimir Vladimirovich Mayakovsky was one of the founders of the Russian Futurists, along with David Burliuk. Born in Georgia, in 1893, Mayakovsky came to Moscow at the age of 15. He became acquainted with Burliuk in 1911, and along with Burliuk, Velimir Khlebnikov, and Aleksei Kruchenykh, Mayakovsky penned the futurist manifesto, *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste*, in 1912. This manifesto set forth the tenets of the movement that was to define Mayakovsky's life and work, a movement inextricably tied to performance, performativity, and bringing revolutionary art and language directly to the people. This approach to poetry and art, where a text is not only meant to be read but experienced, belies the passionate nature of the members of the movement, with Mayakovsky as one of the most visible, powerful, and effective among them. The passion with which Mayakovsky created his art matched the passion with which he lived his life.

Mayakovsky's life followed a dialectic of rapture and agony, all lived, written about, and performed in myriad ways and with equal intensity. One of his earliest long lyric poems, *The Cloud in Trousers* (*Oblaka v shtanakh*), recounts Mayakovsky's first encounter with unrequited love, an experience that would become an intrinsic part of his dialectical life.

Written in 1914–1915, when Mayakovsky was in his early twenties, *A Cloud in Trousers* narrates the author's experience of first love. While in Odessa in 1914, as

part of a Futurist's traveling show with fellow poets Burliuk and Vasily Kamensky, Mayakovsky met Maria Denisova, a young sculptor. According to the firsthand accounts of his comrades, he fell for her instantly and was overcome with passion. Mayakovsky called her La Gioconda. According to Kamensky's account of this period:

> Burliuk maintained a meaningful silence, watching Volodya, who strolled around the room nervously, not knowing what to do with himself or with his sudden overpowering love.He was experiencing that powerful emotion for the first time in his life. He tossed himself around the room and repeatedly murmured, "What am I to do? Write a letter? Wouldn't that be silly?... 'I love you, what more is there to say?' […] But if I say so outright, she'll get scared […] They all will...." (Woroszylski, 1970 , p. 117)

Not only does this lyric poem memorialize Mayakovsky's first love, but it also marks one of Mayakovsky's earliest expressions of an attempt at self-consciousness via intersubjective recognition. According to Hegel's dialectic, however, in order to be able to develop self-consciousness, there must first be consciousness. That is, proof that the subject recognizes itself as an individual being. That Mayakovsky viewed himself as an individual goes without question. Throughout his life, he acknowledged his selfhood time and again in his works. One of his better-known early works that preceded *The Cloud in Trousers* by a year is the poem *I* (*Ya*), which is an intimate confessional of the self and his passions, penned by the author in 1913.

When Mayakovsky began working on *The Cloud in Trousers*, he had already established his consciousness in previous works, allowing this poem to illustrate his experience with unrequited love as a kind of life and death struggle, that which is a requisite part of the master-slave dialectic, and the subsequent trials and tribulations of his constant quest for self-consciousness via intersubjective recognition through the object of his affection.[1]

According to Kamensky's account, many details of *The Cloud in Trousers* reflect Mayakovsky's brief relationship with Denisova. In conversation with Kamensky and Burliuk, Mayakovsky announced that he planned to stay in Odessa in order to be with Maria. They advised him against this, and he told them that he was going to speak with her the next day and would make his decision. "Tomorrow at four she will be here and I'll tell her everything" (Woroszylski, 1970, p. 117). She did come to see him at his hotel, but she arrived many hours after she was expected, and she came to let him know she was engaged, a detail explicated in the poem. "It happened./In Odessa, it happened./'I'll come at four,'" Maria promised (Mayakovsky, 1960, p. 63). But Maria does not arrive and Mayakovsky waits. "Eight./Nine./Ten" (Mayakovsky, 1960, p. 63). Maria does not come to him until after midnight, and

[1] Though Hegel does not address love as such in *Phenomenology*, he does go into some detail on the subject in his earlier essays completed during his time in Jena, which can be found in his *Early Theological Writings* (1971). When addressing love, however, he limits his comments to reciprocal love relationships that follow a standard courtship pattern (courtship, marriage, reproduction). This kind of relationship serves as an example of intersubjective subjectivity as, in the process outlined above, two literally become one. For a more thorough discussion of these works, see Barba-Kay (2016).

the agony of those hours is only the prelude to the distress to come. The disclosure of her engagement put an end to Mayakovsky's courtship of her but not to his love for her.

The passion that Mayakovsky felt for Maria was more than just a fleeting feeling. It was, as it is portrayed in the poem, a battle for possession. He needed his Gioconda to see him, to accept him, and to submit to him. Their struggle was violent, and it left carnage in its wake.

> You swept in abruptly,
> like "take it or leave it!"
> Mauling your suede gloves
> you declared:
> "D'you know,
> I'm getting married."
>
> All right, marry then.
> So what.
> I can take it.
> As you see, I'm calm!
> Like the pulse
> of a corpse. (Mayakovsky, 1960, p. 69)

This battle for possession and the agony of rejection experienced by Mayakovsky was an emotional life and death struggle that he experienced viscerally, physically. While this rejection did not literally kill Mayakovsky, he was left in agony having been denied the intersubjective recognition he so desperately desired, leaving him enslaved to his passion embodied in the person of Maria.

As is known from Hegel, the only way for Mayakovsky to overcome his enslavement was through his work, in the service of the master. So Mayakovsky wrote *A Cloud in Trousers.* He toiled and labored. He put into words the torment of his servitude, and, in doing so, he rediscovered his "I": "Hey!/Gentleman!/Amateurs/of sacrilege/crime,/and carnage,/have you seen/the terror of terrors –/my face/when/I/am absolutely calm?" (Mayakovsky, 1960, 71).

In this passage, the "I" is isolated on a line of its own for the first, but not the last, time in *The Cloud in Trousers.* Through the isolation of this "I," Mayakovsky illustrates how the act of the labor of poetic creation could enable him to reclaim his self, his consciousness, from the restraints of the master-slave relationship while still being held captive. This movement from self-consciousness back to consciousness indicates the next phase of dialectical progression in which the slave begins to work his way free of his intersubjective submission and dependence, while, conversely, the master becomes more entangled, reliant solely on the slave for *his* intersubjective recognition. According to Robert Stern:

> Hegel argues, the master's position is not in fact satisfactory as in so far as he now exercises his authority over a subject that is considered worthless in his eyes, this authority is empty and meaningless. Meanwhile, Hegel suggests, through engaging with the world for the master in work, the slave manages to gain a sense of how it can relate to external reality in a different way, by overcoming its otherness without needing to destroy it; instead, it finds that the objects it labours on can come to embody its projects and be made a vehicle for its ideas. (2013, p. 32)

As Edward J. Brown (1973, p. 131) succinctly states, "Mayakovsky's *Cloud* is a kind of confessional, a confession of the self to itself." This is the labor that can help the slave of unrequited love move toward recognition and self-consciousness.

Through the work of the poem, Mayakovsky is able to access an internal depth previously unknown to him. In the preceding passage, after raging against those who "stole" his "Gioconda," Mayakovsky is beginning to know his own strength, and through his words, he is starting to identify himself as something wholly new and wholly independent.

The following stanza, proceeding directly after the passage quoted above, confirms that the work of the poet is his catalyst for breaking free of his enslavement and for reaching the next stage of consciousness: "I feel/my "I"/is much too small for me./Stubbornly a body pushes out of me" (Mayakovsky, 1960, p. 71).

From the point of this realization, Mayakovsky begins to work free of the bonds of unrequited love. This does not, however, ultimately free him because, even as he sloughs off the chains of this bondage, he is drawn back into another unrequited love dialectic with the poet functioning as the spurned lover to another unattainable object of affection: the state apparatus.

3 Revelation Through Revolution: A Work Toward Freedom?

As Yuri Slezkine (2017, p. 66) writes, for the Bolsheviks:

> Revolution was inseparable from love. It demanded sacrifices for the sake of a future harmony, and it required harmony – in love, comradeship, and book learning – as a condition for fulfillment. Most revolutionary leaders were young men who identified the Revolution with womanhood; many of them were men in love who identified particular women with the Revolution.

The supplanting of a singular woman with the state is, thus, a natural progression for Mayakovsky the revolutionary. And through the act of being a revolutionary, Mayakovsky's relationship with the state fulfills Hegel's requirements, quite literary, for that of a life-and-death struggle. Mayakovsky, however, submits willingly to his position as a slave in service of the Bolshevik (and, later, Soviet) cause. As *A Cloud in Trousers* continues, this transference of the role of master from woman to state and back again vacillates throughout. He offers to "root up his soul" and trample it into a bloody banner for the Bolshevik cause: "[…] then I/shall root up my soul;/I'll trample it hard/till it spread/in blood; and I offer you this as a banner" (Mayakovsky, 1960, p. 85).

The brutal battle between the master and the slave, with the woman/state as the victor and the poet/laborer as the vanquished, appears time and again in Mayakovsky's work.

While in the work of creating *The Cloud in Trousers*, it may be assumed that Mayakovsky was on his way toward a type of intersubjective recognition through

the acts of his artistic labor, in actuality, these two entities, the woman and the state he loved, were to be the perpetual masters of Mayakovsky's life. His poetry oscillates between lyric and political works in service of these two lords of his heart. According to Brown (1973), as Roman Jakobson noted, Mayakovsky had a "dual personality as a poet, demonstrating in his work a regular alternation of lyrical and political or historical themes" (p. 109). Although his themes alternate, creating a kind of dialectical rhythm for his work as a whole, Mayakovsky never managed to progress beyond his enslavement in the dialectic. He perpetually submitted himself to the position of star-crossed lover destined to labor eternally for his beloved.

4 In Conclusion: Not with a Whimper But a Bang

Due to his unwavering commitment to this work, Mayakovsky was able to gain rational consciousness and awareness of himself in the world, but the external world soon began to develop into a world that did not have room for the individual, the poet, the "handsome, twentytwoyearold" in his bright yellow blouse (Mayakovsky, 1960, p. 61). As the Soviet regime changed through the 1920s, the Intelligentsia became increasingly more suspect, and individual artistic expression, regardless of how artfully it expressed devotion and adoration to the Proletariat cause and the state, became more problematic for the party apparatus. A conscious self, even an enslaved one like Mayakovsky, was something to be wary of.

Mayakovsky's death has often been attributed to three primary causes: his heartbreak over the marriage of a woman he loved, Tatiana Yakovleva, a Russian émigré living in Paris, which took place after Mayakovsky was unable to secure a visa to travel to visit her; the developing wariness of the avant-garde in Soviet Russia; and Mayakovsky's own struggles with his diminishing capacity to speak publicly. The evidence, in Mayakovsky's own words, however, points in a different direction: a perfect storm of circumstances mired in a pit of *byt*, turning the dream of a glorious future into a mirage for a man completely devoted to that future and entirely sure that the work of the artist in service of the soviet cause would bring freedom from the dialectic.

Shortly before he died, Mayakovsky struggled with being ostracized from writer's groups and was prevented from putting on his theatrical works for the public. His plays were stifled, his poems were rejected, and his voice was failing him. Fear ran rampant among the Intelligentsia, and Mayakovsky's strength to fight back, like his voice, was fading. Many who, like Mayakovsky, were initially valorized for their agitprop endeavors, over time, began to become subjects of suspicion. Boris Pasternak (1959, p. 99) describes these years as a time "when all poetry had ceased to exist, either [Mayakovsky's] or anybody else's, when Esenin had hanged himself, when, to put it more simply, literature had stopped." The writers who had previously been lauded for their revolutionary endeavors were seen as too free, too independent, too bourgeois, too subjective, and too conscious. They were slowly forced toward the outskirts of society, alienated from their work and their labor despite the

fact that this labor had been completed in service of their collective master, the state. But it wasn't just fear and exclusion but, rather, what that meant for Mayakovsky's dialectical trajectory, that ultimately left him without hope for the future, a future he had eagerly awaited for most of his life.

Suicide is a prevalent theme throughout Mayakovsky's works, and in one of his later plays, *The Bedbug,* written in 1928–1929, he explains how suicide can come to pass:

> PROFESSOR
> Suicide? What's a suicide? *(Looks in the dictionary.)* Suffragette…sugar…suggestive…Here it is – "suicide." *(In amazement)* You shot yourself? On orders from a court? From a revolutionary tribunal?
> ZOYA
> No. On my own.
> PROFESSOR
> *On your own*? Out of carelessness?
> ZOYA
> No. Out of love.
> PROFESSOR
> Oh, come now! Out of love, one bears children, or builds a bridge…But you…Well, I must say! (Mayakovsky, 1960, pp. 278–279)

According to Slezkine (2017, p. 70), "Mayakovsky connected a doomed love to a doomed world. Impossible loves were but reminders of impossible lives." And his love for both the women in his life and the Soviet state were doomed. Mayakovsky spent his life working and waiting for the future to come, and when it did, it was not a future that demanded progress toward the "dialectical synthesis" that, according to Jakobson (1987), Mayakovsky envisioned. Rather, it was a future mired in stagnation, a future that was really no future at all.

As Jakobson observed,

> Majakovskij's [sic] central irrational theme is the theme of love. It is a theme that cruelly punishes those who dare to forget it, whose storms toss us about violently and push everything else out of our ken. And like poetry itself this theme is both inseparable from and in disharmony with our present life […] And love is crushed by *byt*. (1987, p. 282)

As explained by Jakobson, *byt* is a "stagnating slime, which stifles life in its tight, hard mold" (1987, p. 277). *Byt* is the stagnation of daily life. Because of the prevalence of *byt* in Stalinist Russia, Mayakovsky became trapped in forced idleness, in a position of stasis that seemed interminable and hopeless, leaving him stuck in the dialectic. If he could not work himself free, then he would never be free in this life.

In his last long lyric poem, At the *Top of My Voice* (*Vo Ves' Golos*), Mayakovsky performed his finale. While this poem is not Mayakovsky's suicide note, parts of it read as his last, audible, performative farewell. He wrote: "[…] studying the darkness of our era,/you/may also/want to know about me./[…] I'll tell the story/of my time/and myself" (Mayakosky, 2013, p. 146).

Mayakovsky sees the end of his consciousness is near, and he decides to take matters into his own hands. He decides to remove himself from the dialectic rather than fester in stagnation. "But I/choose/to subdue/myself,/standing on the throat/of my song" (Mayakosky, 2013, p. 148).

The death of his poetry, his labor, his song, is equivalent to and predicts the death of the poet.

Perhaps Mayakovsky could have battled his way through the *byt* of the early years of Stalinism if he had not had such faith in the future. It was this hope that ultimately came crashing down and led to utter hopelessness. As Jakobson wrote:

> Majakovskij [sic] has an unshakable faith that, beyond the mountain of suffering, beyond each rising plateau of revolutions, there does exist the "real heaven on earth," the only possible resolution of all contradictions. *Byt* is only a surrogate for the coming synthesis; it doesn't remove contradictions but only conceals them. The poet is unwilling to compromise with the dialectic; he rejects any mechanical softening of the contradictions. (1987, p. 283)

In his recollections of Mayakovsky and the death of the poet, Pasternak reflects on the state of mind of the suicide. He believed that it was a loss of memories, a loss of an attachment to the past that caused the suicidal man to end his life. Pasternak (1959, p. 89) posits thus,

> [h]aving arrived at the thought of suicide, one abandons all hope, one turns away from one's past, one declares oneself a bankrupt and one's memories as non-existent. These memories are no longer capable of reaching the would-be suicide to save him, to sustain him. The continuity of one's inner existence is destroyed, the personality has ceased to exist. In the end, perhaps, one kills oneself not out of loyalty to the decision one has made, but because one can no longer endure the agony that does not seem to belong to anyone in particular, the suffering in the absence of a sufferer, the empty suspense which is not filled up by a life that still goes on.

But it was not memories that Mayakovsky longed for. He wanted the future. After hearing Mayakovsky read *The Cloud in Trousers* in 1915, Maxim Gorky spoke to the young poet at some length. "When [Gorky] told Mayakovsky that he faced 'a great but difficult future,' the poet replied grimly that he wanted 'to have the future today'" (Jangfeldt, 2014, p. 60). Knowing that this future would never come for him, that his vision of a future "dialectical synthesis" was no longer the goal of the Soviet state apparatus and that he would not even be allowed to continue his work as a path to his own limited dialectical development left Mayakovsky with nowhere to turn. He never wanted the past; memories were of no comfort to him; he longed for an impossible future.

The alienation from his labor by the state left Mayakovsky with no viable path toward freedom, toward self-consciousness, toward recognition, but the trajectory of the state itself left Mayakovsky with no future. Mayakovsky survived and broke free from servitude under the women he loved (but could never possess) and in service of the revolution he loved (but could never be fully incorporated into) through the labor of his poetry time and again, only to be drawn back into the dialectic.[2] Without his work, what options could there possibly be for him?

[2] Trotsky (1972) wrote of Mayakovsky that he simply could not become a "direct progenitor of proletarian literature" because he could not "help being repelled by the pseudorevolutionary officialdom" of the Stalinist government and its attempts to consolidate literature and culture into some sort of collectivized totality akin to another five-year plan. Mayakovsky, thus, was alienated from the proletarian literary movement and, thus, from his artistic labor because "[Mayakovsky] rightfully [spoke] of himself as 'one who is not for hire'" (p. 178).

Having lost his purpose in production and with no possible alternative for progressing further down the path to recognition and freedom, there was only one route of escape left to Mayakovsky, one final attempt to break through his dialectical stagnation. On April 14, 1930, Vladimir Vladimirovich Mayakovsky took his own life, shooting himself in the heart in his apartment on Lubyansky Passage. To end his condition of perpetual dialectical servitude, he removed himself from the dialectic all together. The masters of his life could no longer seek recognition in him though the state continued to profit from his labor for decades to come. In his suicide note, itself a literary work worthy of analysis and serious consideration, Mayakovsky wrote: "As they say –/"the case is cloved"/The love boat/has smashed against convention./Life and I are quits/And there's no point in listing/mutual hurts/misfortunes/and offenses" (2013, p. 155).

Even this poem, however, belies Mayakovsky's dialectical life. It is taken from an earlier unfinished lyric in which Mayakovsky had "you" in the place of "life," again highlighting his constant dialectical movement between the self and the other, the individual and the state, the slave and the master. Even his own suicide is foreshadowed in *The Cloud in Trousers*, when Mayakovsky writes, "I and my heart have never lived till May,/in that life we have lived/there are only a hundred Aprils" (Jangfeldt, 2014, p. 511).

Despite the fact that both objects of his affection, women and the Bolshevik cause in several different iterations, proved to be cruel masters for Mayakovsky, he reclaimed his corporeal freedom in the end, in the only way he could, by taking the slave and, with it, all hope of intersubjective recognition, away from his masters once and for all. Upon seeing him on the day of his death, Pasternak wrote:

> He lay on his side with his face to the wall, sullen and imposing, with a sheet up to his chin, his mouth half open as in sleep. Haughtily turning his back on all, even in this repose, even in this sleep, he was stubbornly straining to go away somewhere. His face took one back to the days when he called himself "handsome, twentytwoyearold," for here death had arrested an attitude which it almost never succeeds in capturing. This was an expression with which one begins life but does not end it. (Blake, 1975, p. 10)

Defiant until the end, Mayakovsky wrote the end of his own dialectical life. His lived experience of the dialectic begs the question if the premise proffered by Hegel that there is, in fact, a way out of the master-slave dialectic, a path forward into the future, to self-consciousness, recognition, and freedom, is nothing more than a fairytale designed to keep the slave toiling in servitude. After all, as Mayakovsky wrote in *The Cloud in Trousers*, "I'll leap out! Out! Out!/They've collapsed./But you can't leap out of the heart!" (1960, p. 73). Rather than be trapped in the hopelessness of his own heart and his fruitless dreams for a future that would never come, Mayakovsky stopped its beating with a bullet. Because, as Mayakovsky himself wrote in his suicide note, "this isn't a solution (I don't recommend it to others) but for me there's no other way out" (2013, p. 155).

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Chapter 8
Paul Celan: The Abyss of the Word "Forgiveness"

Fernando Gilabert Bello

In 1967, Paul Celan, a poet and Holocaust survivor, took part in a reading in Freiburg. There, he personally met the philosopher Martin Heidegger, who was Rector of the University of Freiburg promoted by the politics of National Socialism. Much has been said about the meeting between the two and the friendship and admiration that arose after the poet's visit to the philosopher's hut in the Black Forest. The most eloquent as well as the most enigmatic testimony is Celan's poem *Todtnauberg*, in which he expects to hear "a coming word" from the philosopher's lips. We can speculate that, perhaps, this word was "forgiveness." But Heidegger never apologized. After several encounters over the next three years, Celan eventually threw himself into the Seine. This chapter speculates whether it is possible that it was never hearing the word "forgiveness" for the crimes of Nazism that drove him to suicide. To reconstruct this suicide hypothesis, the chapter leans towards the existing biographical documentation on the author, both studies by specialists and Celan's own epistolary exchange. It will also turn directly to his poetic work, especially his late work (in which I believe the encounter with Heidegger is important), where he expresses the absurdity of any attempt at communication, confronting existential anguish itself, perhaps that which led him to the abyss because he could not find the word "forgiveness" in the language of extermination, an otherwise impossible encounter.

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1 Introduction

When, in 1967, Paul Celan, poet and Holocaust survivor, agreed to participate in a reading in Freiburg, he did not imagine that he would have a decisive encounter for the relationship between thought and poetry. At the end of the reading, he personally met the philosopher Martin Heidegger, who was Rector of the University of Freiburg during the National Socialism era. At first, Celan refused to be publicly related to Heidegger, but later he agreed to visit him at the hut that Heidegger had in Todtnauberg, in the Black Forest. The relevance of such an encounter in Heidegger's hut, in spite of its controversy, lies in the fact that it (allowed for) made possible a justification of the proximity between poetry and philosophy. The most eloquent testimony of the poet's visit to the thinker's hut, as well as the most enigmatic, is *Todtnauberg* (1983), a poem by Celan in which he claims to hear a "coming word" from the philosopher.

On that "word to come" I direct my gaze on this occasion, for it is where I want to lend my ear today. I speculate, because there is no certain data, that perhaps that word was "forgiveness." But Heidegger never pronounced it. After several encounters in the following years, Celan ended his life by throwing himself into the Seine. In the present chapter, I echo the hypothesis that never hearing the word "forgiveness" for the crimes of Nazism was what drove the poet to suicide. I will base this suicidal hypothesis both on academic studies and on Celan's own epistolary exchange. Likewise, I will also turn to his poetic work, especially his late work, where I believe that the meeting with Heidegger is of fundamental importance, where he expresses the absurdity of any attempt at communication, facing existential anguish itself, perhaps the one that will lead him to the abyss when he finds the word "forgiveness" in the language of extermination, an encounter that is otherwise impossible.

2 A Room Near the Seine

What follows is of course conjecture. I do not intend to present this research as an explanation of the poet's suicide. Trying to clarify it is an excuse to reflect on his work, which is a turning point in the literature of the twentieth century, entering continuous language games. In addition, his peculiar philosophical-poetic style allows him to dialogue with the most relevant thinkers of his time.

But all that I expose here is merely hypothetical. I can imagine what led Celan, on the evening of April 20, 1970, to leave his apartment on Avenue Zola, near the Seine, and walk to the river. He had been reading a biography of Hölderlin, the poet of the Germans (Heidegger, 2000) and felt the impulse to get up and leave the apartment. On his walk, he would probably pass a few closed *cafés* and exchange a polite greeting with the watchman posted at the sentry box of the Citröen factory in Javel. Arriving at the quai, he would turn his head to the right where the presence of the

Eiffel Tower would evoke the words he had underlined a short time before in the biography he was reading: "Sometimes genius darkens and sinks into the bitterness of his heart" (Felstiner, 1995, p. 287). He went to the bridge and turned his head towards the docks; perhaps he would see some clochard dozing, and then the underlined words about the poet who ended up mad and locked in a tower came back. He would not end up like that; he went to the railing, and as he lifted his legs to cross it, he knew that already his genius had darkened, and there remained only that *Lichtzwang* delivered shortly before to the publisher. Clinging to the parapet, he turned and gazed at the streetlights of the Parisian night, but all was now dark and bitter; all that remained was to sink into the Seine. The next morning, his corpse would be found floating adrift.

We truly know nothing about what went through Celan's head while he was reading the biography, nor about what urged him to commit suicide. Those who could have shed light on this fateful event remained silent or died soon after, like Nelly Sachs, who died far from Paris the same day the poet was buried (Dinesen, 1992). Perhaps she would have suspected his intentions in their frequent epistolary exchange.

Any hypothesis about his suicide does not stand on solid foundations because we have no data to confirm the motive of his suicide. We can even assume that it was an accident. But it is doubtful, especially when we know about his manias, his depressive tendencies, and his outbursts of madness, which became more acute eight days before his death (Felstiner, 1995). All this mental tension is continuously reflected in his poetics. Without testimony of that fateful night, we can only rely to clarify his death on data subject to our own hermeneutics: what he announced with his poetry and what those who treated him in the last months, who also had to interpret the facts after the event, told us about him. One of the few reliable facts are those underlined words in Hölderlin's biography, but what did Celan intend to imply by highlighting them?

Going to Hölderlin's reading leads us to suppose that perhaps it had to do with the encounter and the possibility of dialogue with Heidegger, whose particular reading of the Romantic poet uniquely connects thought and poetry, something that caught the attention of Celan, whom we know had been approaching Heidegger's philosophical work since the 1950s (Emmerich, 2020). Their meeting in Freiburg three years before the poet's suicide, Celan's visit to the Todtnauberg hut, and their mutual correspondence allow us to assume a dialogue between the two, a connection through language, through words. But I argue, however, that between the two there is only the abyss of silence.

3 A Silent Dialogue in Todtnauberg

Why does silence become an abyss? What separates poet and thinker so that dialogue is not established and only silence mediates? In this encounter (not misencounter), silence stands out, not because there is no conversation between our

protagonists, but because of the impossibility of speech between them. Silence is terrible and even more so in the case of poetry, for it is nothingness itself, the impossibility of speech. To speak is to seek the word, but to find it is a limit (Gadamer, 1983). The poet longs to go after that word that is never reached, because he "says" what is impossible to say. But in Todtnauberg, the poet did not hope to articulate that pursued word, but his hope was to hear it. Silence martyrs the poet: his world is that of "saying," even saying with silence. In the encounter between Celan and Heidegger, silence says nothing, because there is nothing. That is the terrible thing.

Perhaps this terrible silence is what beats in Celan's suicide. My hypothesis moves in the (failed) possibility of the dialogue between poet and thinker. This silent dialogue is starred by a philosopher attached to National Socialism and a poet survivor of the concentration camp and must necessarily be located in the hut that Heidegger owned in Todtnauberg, where so many have tried to interpret this encounter (Oyarzun, 2013). It is convenient, first of all, to narrate the events that led to the meeting.

In 1967, the German Gerhard Baumann invited Celan to a reading held on July 24 of that year in the Auditorium Maximus of the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität in Freiburg. More than 1,000 people made up the audience, the largest number of listeners Celan ever had (Celan & Celan-Lestrange, 2001). Heidegger was part of this large audience. Until then, they had not known each other personally, but the work of each was no stranger to the other. We know of Heidegger's interest in poetry and the imprint it left on his philosophical thinking from his reading of Hölderlin (Heidegger, 2000), Rilke (Heidegger, 2002), and Trakl (Heidegger, 1985), as well as his friendship with poets such as René Char (Safranski, 1999), facilitating the proximity between philosophy and poetry. Celan was also no stranger to the late philosophy of Heidegger, of whom we know that he was a fine and critical reader (2004) and that he even wanted to contact him as early as 1957 (Pöggeler, 1990). The only drawback to such an encounter was the burden that weighed on both of them, albeit in a different way: the concentration camp.

After Celan's reading, Heidegger approached Baumann to greet him and someone even suggested a photograph of the both of them. But Celan rejected it, considering it inappropriate that his name should be linked to someone who adhered to National Socialism. However, he regreted his behavior and agreed to visit the Todtnauberg hut with Heidegger and Baumann. At some point, they spoke alone, but we do not know the content of the conversation (Safranski, 1999). Perhaps Celan expected an explicit gesture of repentance about Nazism that Heidegger was unable or unwilling to make: to utter the word "forgiveness," as I speculate here. However, it seems that Celan had that hope, since such a word would mean many things and not a simple gesture of repentance (Safranski, 1999). In that conversation alone, Heidegger must have said something for the poet to harbor that hope: Baumann found them in animated conversation, and also, shortly after the meeting, when the poet Marie Luise Kaschnitz meets Celan, she finds him in an exultant state of mind (Baumann, 1992). It is in that joy that he writes the poem *Todtnauberg* (1970) (evoking the return journey from the visit). Such an encounter is taken by the poet as positive by making possible something like a dialogue (France-Lanord,

2004). Since then, Heidegger and Celan maintained a friendly epistolary relationship and several meetings, until their last appointment a little less than a month before the poet's suicide.

Celan believes, it is my hypothesis, that the fact that Heidegger formulates the word "forgiveness" opens the door to dialogue between the two, but such a dialogue is difficult, if not impossible (Oyarzun, 2013), not only because Heidegger was silent: Celan is also silent about the conversation in the cabin. The possibility lies in establishing a complicit dialogue in silence. But this is not the case: I dare say that their silences "speak" different languages.

The center of this possible failed dialogue is in *Todtnauberg*, the poem in which he records the visit to Heidegger's hut, collected posthumously in *Lichtzwang* (1970). Such a poem has been interpreted as showing how the walk with the philosopher becomes a descent back into the hells of Nazism (Bollack, 2017). But I disagree with such an interpretation: even if we grant that the poet evokes the memory of horror, I believe that the encounter produces (or at least that is Celan's hope) some healing (the mention of arnica, consolation of the eyes) in seeing that there is not so much difference between the two isolated individuals (orchid and orchid, alone). However, the difficulty of the poem is one of its central characteristics: such difficulty prevents a reliable hermeneutic verdict. This is reinforced by its being an impenetrable text of pure diaphanousness (Oyarzun, 2013). In that sense, it is like silence: something totally open. But that openness, as there is no sound or saying in silence, prevents entering silence itself, because any irruption already prevents silence from being silence. This does not mean that the poem is hermetic, but it should be noted that it is not unidirectional either.

Although rather simple, Gadamer's interpretation of *Todtnauberg* is adequate for our own exegesis, even though it is not critical of Heidegger: Celan expects a word of hope, a coming word from Heidegger. But Heidegger cannot utter such a word, something Celan understands on the way back (Gadamer, 1987). We could think that such a word is "forgiveness," but Heidegger cannot say that word being consistent with his own approaches, justifying this impossibility of his saying in Gadamer's eyes. To conjecture about such a coming word would be adventurous because it is not a word of hope, but "corresponds" to it, because it does not say something, but it is only an event of its own "coming" to the encounter (Oyarzun, 2013). Only if the word is "forgiveness" is the tension between Celan and Heidegger illuminated. Where does such tension lie? The answer leaves us speechless: in the Holocaust, in Auschwitz.

4 There Where the Horror

The horror of the Holocaust silences us. The extermination of the Jewish people leaves the poet speechless; the adherence to Nazism is silenced in the thinker. The terrible thing is the emptiness that this silence leaves as it is impossible to say anything about the horror. But neither is Celan a spokesman for the victims, nor is

Heidegger the usual Nazi. In Auschwitz, there is an exceptional situation (Agamben, 1998). This exception in the first instance provokes the tensional silence of both and can only be broken by a reconciliatory word that intercedes between the two, loosening the exception and bringing it back to the everyday. But this would be true if the dialogue were broken by their differences. But there is only silence, there is no disagreement or rupture because they are two isolated individuals placed in the trance of having to answer each for their own (Oyarzun, 2013). There is the possibility of conversing, but what prevails is a silence that in each one presents a different meaning, mediating an abyss between those meanings.

We can speculate about a dialogue that allows bridging that abyss, but only about its possibility, not about its plot or its interpretation, since the abyss between both senses of silence is the result of horror: mutism makes dialogue impossible and isolates the meaning of each silence, preventing cohesion through the same language. Adorno's statement (1983) about whether every poem after Auschwitz is barbarism, whether there is a possibility of a sincere and true poetics afterwards is relevant. The answer is yes—Adorno himself acknowledges it after reading Celan (Adorno, 2004)—but it is loaded with pain: it is not a rupture of silence evoking hope, but a question whose meaning is only in the mutism in the face of modern horror. Because Auschwitz is only a milestone of an epoch dominated by horror. Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Chernobyl, Baia Mare... Landmarks where horror is shown under an aura of progress. Faced with the silence produced by these horrors, poetry tries to break the silence through a question that brings it closer to philosophy. But to such a question, one should not expect an answer, at least not in the usual way.

But it seems that Celan did hope to find such an answer in his encounter with Heidegger: a word from the thinker, his answer to the horror, because he does not understand that Heidegger can only be silent (Gadamer, 1987). That hope is reflected in Celan's signature in Todtnauberg's guestbook: "To the book of the hut, with the gaze on the star of the fountain, with the hope of a coming word from the heart" (Pöggeler, 1986, p. 259). And also in the poem *Todtnauberg*: "word coming from the thinker." Some have claimed that this word can only be "forgiveness" (Lacoue-Labarthé, 1999). But Heidegger responds with silence.

5 Philosopher's Answer

Philosophers' answers open up more questions than they seek to close; philosophy, in order to answer, usually asks again. Each question opens up a whole new battery of questions (Heidegger, 1976). But it is that Heidegger cannot give an answer to the use, as Celan expects, about Auschwitz. It even seems at first that the latter understands that such an answer could not be given (Gadamer, 1987). After the meeting with Heidegger, Celan presents a predisposition to joy, but three years later, this enthusiasm has progressively deteriorated. On the 26th of March 1970, Holy Thursday, the last meeting with Heidegger took place. After a reading of poems, the poet accused him of inattention. Testimonies indicate that this accusation was false,

since even Heidegger could repeat from memory some recited verses (Safranski, 1999). That evening Heidegger took leave of Baumann with words of assumption of the poet's condition: "Celan is ill, incurably ill" (Baumann, 1992, p. 80). Celan threw himself into the waters of the Seine that same spring, on the 20th of April.

It is possible that Celan intended Heidegger's coming word to be a "traditional" response: an apology, to say the word "forgiveness." The philosopher's silence opened the hope for a future response, of whatever kind. First of all, as I have pointed out, the poet was reluctant to meet Heidegger, because, for Celan, the dialogue was broken beforehand by the crimes of Nazism. But Heidegger neither justifies his political adherence nor the horror. He only remains silent. The hope that this silence might mean repentance urges Celan to approach the thinker, as if the silence were not the result of incomprehension of the horror, but of shame. Perhaps he harbored the secret desire to hear "the word of the thinker that reaches the heart," which could only be "forgiveness." But Heidegger says no such word. Nor any other. Heidegger is only silent.

Celan's hope arises from the enthusiasm of believing he has found a peer in the search for connection through the language of poetry and philosophy. But when that enthusiasm dissipates, there arises only the horror that impels him to write, not seeking an answer, but only transcribing the questions that that horror asks in the knowledge that there is no answer. Because the meaning of any question is to pursue an answer, even if infinite surrounding questions arise, as happens in philosophy. But Celan does not seek to expand the question to other formulas that deepen the question, he only seeks an answer to horror. His desperation could even be satiated with a justification by Heidegger of Auschwitz, perhaps alleging ignorance of what happened there would also be worthwhile; it would not be enough, but it would be an answer, if only to place Heidegger as an unredeemed Nazi. But if that answer were the word "forgiveness," it would be a success that would suggest a suture to the dialogue broken beforehand.

6 The Reason for Silence

What is the explanation for Heidegger's silence? We must qualify that Celan, in spite of being close to philosophy, is a poet and does not have the philosophical depth of Heidegger: his work with language points at all times to poetics, which, although close to reflection, harbors differences with respect to it. Celan's interest in Heidegger, in addition to his adherence to Nazism and the mark that this implies in the poet's biography, I believe that it lies in the use of a language full of neologisms that sharpens in the thinker's late philosophy (Vattimo, 1989). However, Celan reaches a summit that every thinker has to face: the anguish in the face of the aporia that underlies all metaphysical reflection. The paradox lies in harboring the hope of a rational response, reason itself being the one that should put the word "forgiveness" on the philosopher's lips. Rationalism is a method of thought that imposes a "closed" model of language that explains scientific approaches without

fissures. But with such language, one cannot respond to horrors like Auschwitz. When we think of the Holocaust and try to find an explanation for it, our reason is short-circuited.

Heidegger might suspect that every word he said to Celan about Auschwitz would be an abyss. There is no viable answer on a rational plane of meaning. And in the absence of a rational response, such as I think Celan expects, silence is necessary. Heidegger cannot say a word about Auschwitz, but not because of the massacre that took place there, not because he adhered to the movement, but because of the very tessitura of thinking the concentration camp. One can speak of Auschwitz as a historical fact or as a subject of study, even as Celan does through poetry (the poem *Todesfuge*); one can speak of the horror and suffering of the Jewish people, but there are no words with which to say the lack of consequence with one's own thinking, because existence (*Dasein*) loses its authentic counterpart and voluntarily submits to the middle stage of everyday life (Heidegger, 2010).

Heidegger's affiliation to Nazism is beyond any doubt (Ott, 1993). Another thing is the motive or if he understood that it supposed his adhesion or if his philosophy really harbors some political approaches in agreement with the National Socialist theses. This is not the subject of the present study. It is necessary to emphasize that Nazism harbors a "scientific" component (although in a rigged way), that advocates that the Aryan race establishes a dominion over the rest, because its pre-eminence is justified under biological precepts. But if Heidegger defends some pro-German positions, he does it from areas outside reason and science. Heidegger's support for the German spirit is expressed above all in terms of language, but not the logical-rational language: from German spirit and language, no predominance over the Jews can be justified, since they can speak German perfectly well, there being no anti-Semitic superiority of a spiritual nature.

7 The Silence of Reason

If we try to justify Auschwitz, we find an abyss that reason cannot answer. Nazi "rationalism" comes to justify it, but always by means of fudging and not by means of rigorous scientific research. Thus, it seems impossible to find a rational answer for the concentration camp. And despite Adorno's reticence about the possibility of poetry after the horror, however, the only answer seems to come from the poetic.

Heidegger's silence is poetic, for only through poetry, which is open language, can the abyss be named since the language of reason and science is closed. This, which Celan also understood, did not, however, facilitate the dialogue, for, like the poem *Todtnauberg*, such language becomes impenetrable because it is so diaphanous. If the question of the concentration camp is answered by reason, it becomes the old question of the Theodicy translated into a new language suitable for the twentieth century. The Theodicy asked: if evil exists, how can the existence of God be justified? Now that question has become aesthetic: if the horror of Auschwitz exists, how can there be poetry?

This change is one more episode of the secularization that rules universal history and that is at the heart of the crisis of conscience that has led to the epochal changes that have occurred in the West. In the modern world, the limits imposed by the values of the human will are suppressed, and with this suppression comes nihilism (Wolin, 2001): pure nothingness, which is what Auschwitz represents. There, reason capsizes and becomes mute. This mutism is not a poetic silence, but the impossibility of saying anything more through its own mechanisms. When nihilism reigns, the status achieved by reason throughout history is shipwrecked in the twentieth century. Each epoch forges its predominant figure: the first is the divinity and with it originates the Theodicy's question about evil. After it became the empire as the first secularized answer to the problem and then came the various figures that at each moment designate what is or is not valid: humanity, the State, liberty, science, etc. With each historical change, the predominant figure is replaced by another and withdraws to become embers: religion, politics, humanism. But such vestiges do not serve as criteria for making decisions, since they only survive as a surplus that no longer sets the standard of validity.

Behind all this process, reason beats as the instigator that either supports or demolishes each figure. But after the horrors of the twentieth century, reason is now the one who goes bankrupt, opening the door to relativism and nihilism. In these times of hardship, empty, and ephemeral figures are erected, who know of their provisionality and precariousness, waiting for a new figure that may never come. Thus, the provisional figure par excellence, we dare to venture, is art, collected in the form of poetics, which takes on the role of the divine: if evil exists, how can the artistic enterprise be justified?

8 Above Good and Evil, Above Pain

Nietzsche (2002) placed art, poetics, as the predominant figure of our time before aesthetic conceptions that openly break with reason. Evil is a moral concept and, as such, alien to art, the analysis of which is the responsibility of aesthetics and about which moral studies have nothing to say. But Nietzsche errs in pretending to derive the artistic enterprise towards science (Vattimo, 2002), since the latter is based on reason. Reason is beyond good and evil. This is the same criterion that the Nazis employ in Auschwitz: the concentration camp derives from a reason that is beyond good and evil; although it seems irrational, it represents an act of dominion of reason over nature.

Reason eliminates the pain of the concentration camp. But both in Celan's poetics and in Heidegger's silence, the only thing that remains is the event full of pain. And in the face of pain, there is only room for silence because it is not to pronounce the word "forgiveness" for Auschwitz: one can say the concentration camp, but its meaning is saturated by nihilism, it is not a mute nothingness, but it resounds in a saying that drags again and again to the void. This saturated nihilism that leads us irremediably each time to the Holocaust is not only present in Auschwitz but also in

other problems of our time, such as the ecological crises, in the effort to dominate the world and not to let it be.

This vision of domination responds to the will to power formulated by Nietzsche, which can only be overcome through poetic approaches that respond with a language other than that of reason. Poetics alludes to creative activity, giving existence to that which has none, but if it is only understood as lyric, it no longer has the character of representing. Representing has to do with temporality, for it is to bring something to the present, something that, like the concentration camp, fortunately, is no longer, but that returns again and again to question us in our now. In bringing something into presence, only that doing-present itself indicates that which becomes present, without a further assumption and conclusion, which is the mode of rational argument (Heidegger, 2001). In the face of this argument of reason, whose line is closed, poetics alludes to the language of silence, a being-openness of many forms.

9 In Conclusion

To make a study on a hypothesis of the suicide of someone like Celan implies more than a closed conclusion, an opening towards something different. Rather than closing, I show that, purely diaphanous, like the poem *Todtnauberg*, the wound is so open that it is impossible to suture. Let these words serve then only as the opening of a new question that, from the silence, pushes us to continue in the thread of questioning, as a proximity between poetry and thought. Both are co-originary and rely on silence. Thus, philosopher and poet are founders of language. But language is even more original than poetry and thought; hence, the question of language is perhaps even more urgent. But even more original is silence. Celan's anguish is justified in that silence because he cannot find the word "forgiveness" in the language of extermination, because to speak of "forgiveness" implies a poetically impossible closure of the wound. All that remains is silence, because to say "forgiveness" can only precisely become an unbridgeable abyss.

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Chapter 9
"Lines of Flight": The Deterritorialization of Gilles Deleuze

Alison Parks

French philosopher Gilles Deleuze died by suicide at the age of 70. His suicide occurred amidst a chronic struggle with a worsening respiratory illness that made daily life difficult. Because his suicide can be so directly connected to his diagnosis, even established organizations like the American Psychiatric Association would view it as a reasonable, nonpathological end to a life "no longer worth living." There is, then, no need to look further for "clues" or to ask "why" regarding his death. Further, Deleuze himself believed that to read the work of counterculture authors and seek out "anguish, solitude, guilt […] the whole tragedy of interiority" represents "decadence and degeneracy," signaling the "masochistic impulses of the academic." In this chapter, therefore, I seek out in his work clues for managing a suicidal subjectivity. I argue that within his conceptualization of rhizomatic lines of flight with Felix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, as well as within three posthumously published volumes that offer further elaboration of the relationship between his life and his philosophy, Deleuze makes space for suicide as an exit from contemporary power relations. By offering the suicidal subjectivity opportunities for not-being and contextualizing feelings of madness, Deleuze offers tools for self-analysis that enable one to work through feelings of suicidality without being stigmatized or pathologized.

> Young people today walk a fine line indeed between a persistent temptation to commit suicide and the birth of a certain form of political consciousness peculiar to prison.
>
> Groupe d'information sur les prisons, *HM.'s letters*, 1972

> Write, form a rhizome, increase your territory by deterritorialization, extend the line of flight to the point where it becomes an abstract machine covering the entire plane of consistency.
>
> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A thousand plateaus*, 1980

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In his essay "The simplest of pleasures," published for the first time in 1979 in the French rag *gai pied*, Michel Foucault—colleague, friend, and contemporary of philosopher Gilles Deleuze—implores "the lovers of humanity" who "really want to see a decrease in the number of suicides" to stop asking "why?" after the fact and to support those suicides undertaken "with forethought, quietly, and without wavering" (1996, p. 296). He writes:

> The people who survive those who have died by suicide […] see suicide as nothing but superficial traces, solitude, awkwardness, and unanswered cries. These people can't help but ask 'why'?: the only question about death that shouldn't be asked. 'Why? Because I wanted to.' (1996, p. 296)

He further hypothesizes that one reason for the so-called suicide spiral of his time is that people are too depressed by the "nasty things forced on someone who's aspiring to suicide" (Foucault, 1996, p. 296) (from police intervention, involuntary commitment, stigmatization, etc.) that they rush into the act by any means necessary before they have had a chance to really think things through. I argue that while some attempts have been made to address the oppressive nature of such interventions against the suicidal subject, Foucault's hypothesis continues to ring true in western society today. Since 2020, I have lost one friend to suicide and have seen friends and students hospitalized—voluntarily and involuntarily—after a crisis and have never asked "why?." I know what it is like to desperately wish you were dead. To inventory items you have on hand and weigh the potential lethality of their misuse. Anyone who has ever wanted to die knows the answer to "why?."

In the case of French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, the question of "why?" feels even less relevant. He died by suicide at the age of 70. One could say, he lived a long, full life. According to his obituary in the *New York Times*, he died by suicide in the face of "a worsening chronic respiratory illness for which he had recently undergone a tracheotomy" (Whitney, 1995). In its most recent 5th edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the American Psychiatric Association (2013) recognizes that suicides undertaken in cases of painful or terminal illnesses may occur free from any underlying pathological conditions, and in some places across the United States and around the world, Deleuze would be able to seek a physician-assisted death given his prognosis. Thus, one may argue that according to the ableist, neoliberal rationality that dictates our time that he was facing a life "no longer worth living" and that his suicide was "rational." Finally, there is the fact that Deleuze simply believed in the world and wanted to be in it (Moten, 2013, see also Chap. 12 in this book). To avoid giving into what Deleuze referred to as the "masochistic impulses of academics" (2004c, p. 264)—and in alignment with his critique that the scholarly need to read counter-cultural authors and to find in them "anguish, solitude, guilt, the drama of the unconscious, the whole tragedy of the interior" is revealing of our own "decadence and degeneracy" (2004b, p. 257)—in this text, I instead turn to the work of Deleuze to seek out the ways in which his theorizing may offer tools or comfort for those grappling with a pull toward suicide.

I argue that especially within his conceptualization of rhizomatic lines of flight with Felix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, as well as within three posthumously published volumes that offer further elaboration of the relationship between his life and his philosophy, Deleuze makes space for suicide as an exit from contemporary power relations. By offering the suicidal subjectivity opportunities for not-being and contextualizing feelings of madness, Deleuze offers tools for self-analysis that enable one to work through feelings of suicidality without being stigmatized or pathologized.

1 Lines of Flight[1]

Writing on the letters of a prisoner known as H. M., Deleuze and the *Groupe d'information sur les prisons* assert that "young people today [in 1972] walk a fine line indeed between a persistent temptation to suicide and the birth of a certain form of political consciousness peculiar to prison" (Group for Information on Prisons, 2004, p. 244). They describe that within his letters, H. M. writes of a desire to flee—from the police, from the prison, from the country, and from himself, an interior flight theoretically achievable within the walls of the prison cell. His last mode of escape and his ultimate choice was suicide. Faced with the relentless foreclosure of all other avenues, suicide remained his only option. To conclude their piece, the Group writes: "A specific number of people are directly and personally responsible for the death of H. M." (2004, p. 246). Zooming out from the prison to the social conditions of life under capitalism, more broadly—an applicable gesture given prison as a location where exercises of power are most on display and concentrated (Foucault, 2004)—I turn to the situation of the youth cited above and their "persistent temptation to suicide" and argue that similar to the young people of 1972, today's young people experience a similar ambivalence. In the case of the prisoner H. M., it is clear that there were external forces affecting his psyche and driving his subjectivity toward suicide. When lines of flight are cut off, when access to one's interiority is restricted or forcibly altered, existence itself becomes deadened and repressed. The experience of a life is stripped of its intensity.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari enumerate the principles of the rhizome. In nature, a rhizome is a "subterranean stem"; "bulbs and tubers are rhizomes" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 6). The rhizome is multiplicity. It is "made only of lines: lines of segmentarity and stratification […] and lines of flight and deterritorialization" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 21). In the realm of political resistance, this feature of the rhizome is imperative as it is through these lines of

[1] Except when directly quoting works that translate the concept *ligne de fuite* as "line of escape," I use "line of flight" throughout the chapter as my preferred translation.

flight and through deterritorialization that the rhizome creates and forms new growths, and "each of these new becomings brings about the deterritorialization of one term and the reterritorialization of the other; the two becomings interlink and form relays in a circulation of intensities pushing the deterritorialization even further" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 10). Rhizomes are liberatory. Revolution happens when multiple lines of flight converge and take on a new, collective nature. Yet, there is always a risk of a rhizome being over-coded, reorganized, restratified, and resignified relative to old structures. Under capitalism, this danger is especially great. While all social systems have their own lines of flight, capitalism is unique to the extent that lines of flight "are the very conditions of its operation" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 9). Deleuze (2004c, p. 270) states:

> Capitalism is founded on a generalized decoding of every flow: flows of wealth, flows of labor, flows of language, flows of art, etc. It did not create any code, it created a kind of accounting, an axiomatics of expanding of decoded flows, as the basis of its economy. It ligatures points of escape and moves ahead. It is always expanding its borders, pushing them back once more.

In other words, capitalism creates a system into which individuals can connect their desiring-machines. These connections produce new desire in an infinite loop that cannot exist outside of the social field in which it is produced. Liberatory thought becomes increasingly difficult, though not impossible, as the limits of the system are constantly displaced and recoded. Deleuze and Guattari had hope. "Write," they urged "form a rhizome, increase your territory by deterritorialization, extend the line of flight to the point where it becomes an abstract machine covering the entire plane of consistency" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 11). Deleuze (2020) believed that even under the conditions of social life, one could remain optimistic and invent new ways of life for oneself, ways of life that provided a shield from the pressures of everyday existence.

Unfortunately, for the young people of the twenty-first century, it seems even more difficult to remain optimistic as Deleuze did given the new era of expanded neoliberalism and hypermedia, characterized by Imani Perry as a time wherein "experience and identity are frequently (dis)placed onto simulacra" (2018, p. 132). Following Deleuze's tendency toward literalization, it is fair say that in the current moment, living in society means being "plugged in" at every moment—as "social" media is co-opted by algorithms and advertising, our desiring-machines are firing and looping at speeds previously unknown, worked into overdrive to the point where, to quote Perry, "sociality is flattened" (2018, p. 137). The self, itself, becomes simulacra, engendering feels of isolation and collective neuroses. In Jean Baudrillard's work on simulacra, he writes that in the "virtual terrain," "the territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory—precession of simulacra—that engenders territory" (1994, p. 2). In other words, the curation of our attention, our psyches, and our subjectivities is being controlled by external forces from the moment of our participation, voluntary or not. Rhizomatic formations, according to their principles

of cartography and decalcomania, are "not amenable to any structural or generative model" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 12) and thus seemingly offer a mode of resistance to these forces. Through lines of flight and deterritorialization, the map can, theoretically, be redrawn, *still*, bringing together the various pieces that managed to survive their initial mapping. But, as Perry points out, while capitalism has always moved to strangle lines of flight and rhizomes always risk co-optation, the neoliberalism of our present moment is fast, "integrat[ing] the appearance of counter-hegemony at lightning speed" (2018, p. 229). What does that mean for those of us living in its grips? An increasing sense of futures foreclosed. An increasing rate of suicide, especially for those belonging to marginalized groups whose futures are also at risk of being cut off by the violences imposed by white supremacist, colonialist logics. When myriad lines of flight are foreclosed, and when deterritorialization reaches out to find nothing but a void where other lines of connection ought to be, little hope remains, and any flight becomes one of "destruction, abolition pure and simple" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 229). Understanding suicide in this context is, therefore, neither existential nor indicative of some death drive inhabiting our consciousness. Suicide is just another avenue.[2] What does such an understanding of suicide offer? What does it mean to exist with a perpetual temptation to suicide? What can the political thought of Deleuze offer as a balm to such tendencies?

2 Building Intensity and Deterritorializing the Interior

Writing the paper for the conference *I want to die* (Complutense University of Madrid, 2022) was my first attempt at producing something new after a long COVID-19/post-dissertation hiatus. The process of writing has led to multiple new ideas, including the ability to finally begin putting form to a piece of writing that was conceived rhizomatically nearly five years ago, spurred by a seemingly throwaway remark made by one its members. While the nature of that

[2] Although it is not my project, I must take a moment to briefly note how Deleuze's contemporaries attempted to reconcile his suicide with his philosophy. For the most part, attempts were made by journalists and philosophers to rationalize his suicide within his works. Beaulieu and Ord (2017) push back against this history and against arguments that Deleuze's death by suicide is a contradiction to his philosophy. They argue that his suicide is, instead, an affirmation of life and vitalism: Deleuze manifesting the infinite. I am inclined to align with interpretations of his suicide such as that presented by Colombat, which assert that that for Deleuze, death comes from the outside, "because the act of living is necessarily opened to the outside, on new becomings and metamorphoses. Suicide itself can be, in this specific context, a very positive, concrete and philosophical act of assertion, a 'vital aphorism' and an 'anecdote of thought.' At the moment of death, the individual rejoins the 'empty shape of time,' the 'perpetuum mobile,' the 'aleatory point'" (1996, p. 246). I also argue, in line with others, that there is much that Deleuze's philosophy can teach about suicide (e.g., Woodward, 2007), while regarding his own suicide as simple matter-of-fact.

rhizome has been irrevocably altered by suicide since, it still persists and has produced new adventitious growths—"A rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will still start up again on one of its old lines, or new lines" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 9). Throughout his life, Deleuze fostered a number of intellectual connections and friendships. He maintained a rhizomatic relationship with Guattari, producing writings and intensities that maintained across space and time, life and death. In the essay "For Félix" upon Guattari's death, Deleuze writes that the way to keep him alive is by following the "open paths of creation" in his works, discovering and rediscovering the singularities in its gestures (2007, pp. 367–368). Upon his own death, those writing of him spoke of him and his activities as if he were still present, in line with his philosophical orientation toward the world.

Dying by suicide is often preceded by periods of feeling hopeless or otherwise isolated. While the idea of external re-territorialization through deterritorialization may be one that is so hoped for and desired, the actuality of it is much more difficult to realize. Telling someone who feels suicidal to simply go out into the world and connect—virtually or in the flesh—comes across as a nearly impossible order. How does a suicidal subjectivity reconfigure itself, inventing new practices of interiority to combat external scripts and produce new lines of flight, even in isolation? Is it possible to reconcile persistent suicidality with liberatory thought in such a way that it does not culminate in the end of life?[3]

The first step in answering the above questions involves acknowledging the ways in which contemporary power relations, especially those which operate through the institutions of psychoanalysis and modern psychiatry (see Chap. 3 in this book), actively work to redirect one's desiring-machines, plugging them into appropriate channels, foreclosing deviant lines of flight, and offering therapies to aid the maladaptive psyche. Per Freud, for example, western civilization has been hampering the desires of the unconscious since its inception, implementing taboos to mediate the dilemmas of collective life. As a relief, Freud turns to sublimation—a method of "shifting the instinctual aims in such a way that they cannot come up against frustration from the external world" (2010, p. 48). However, this a) even by Freud's admission offers only a "mild intensity" in return for its effort and b) is an increasingly impossible task as desiring production operates on an infinite loop, and as many of the procedures of sublimation have been so coopted by neoliberalism that the unconscious itself has become mediated by the external (digital) world. Freud suggests that people may also turn to religion for its ability to produce a higher intensity of feeling in the face of deadening instincts and neuroses. Freud asserts that a more thorough and "energetic" procedure than that of sublimation is the "delusional remoulding of reality to suit one's needs" (2010, p. 51). When this is done on a mass

[3] Particularly to the end of one's measurable, biological life. This is distinct from the Deleuzean notion of "a life," which is indefinite in its immanence: "a life" exists beyond the life of the individual and is populated by singularities that constitute the event *known as* life (Deleuze, 2005).

scale, it is religion. When it occurs on the individual level, it is pathological. Paranoia. Psychosis. Schizophrenia. When one's "inner experience and behavior […] deviates markedly from the expectations of the individual's culture" they may be marked with a personality disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 689). Even as some disorders like depression and anxiety are becoming more normalized, the aforementioned diagnoses, along with expressions of suicidality, remain highly stigmatized. And yet, it is to these conditions that Deleuze and Guattari (1987) turn to provide a model of existence that most contradicts capitalism and its accompanying power structures. Rather than returning the unconscious back to moral unities, Deleuze and Guattari embrace the multiplicities of the unconscious, and, importantly, for my purposes here, they read a politics into these multiplicities that would otherwise be flattened by Freudian psychology and the liberal forms of its medicalization. Throughout the two volumes of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) emphasize the two extremes: one deadening, one revolutionary. Having already described the flattening effects of capitalism, I turn briefly to their liberatory notion of schizophrenia, before meditating on some ways to mitigate the intensity without going to the extreme, in order to alleviate feelings of suicidality, or at least serve to contextualize them within the singularity of an individual's life.

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) argue that desire can be revolutionary. They argue that madness can produce something "so wonderful" that it must be repressed by our society. That "lived experience is intensive" that one can experience an intensity, and such an intensity has no resemblance to "sensible qualities" (Deleuze, 2004a, p. 238). Deleuze and Guattari present the figure of the schizophrenic to represent pure intensity when viewed outside of the confines of the psychiatric apparatuses. The schizophrenic, in their work, experiences life as a process of production without an object, and without any epistemological guarantees: "the self and the non-self, outside and inside, no longer have any meaning whatsoever" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 2). The schizophrenic is, therefore, freed from the processes that produce the subject under capitalism and resists its flattening effects. That being said, the wonderful is also dangerous. Such intensity risks collapsing in on itself (Deleuze, 2004a). To feel suicidal is to experience an intensity. The opposite of a deadening, the feeling of suicidality is one predicated on the building of intensity to the point of destruction. The result of no longer being able to cope with the pure experience of life.[4] I argue that opening ourselves up to such an understanding of suicide, while it may not tell us much about the death of Deleuze itself, does offer a new mode of relating to those grappling with suicidality. Experiencing intensity *is living*. It is part of a life, and if it were recognized more so as such, we might see a decrease in the number of suicides because we would not be so afraid of facing intensity. Those who are suicidal may not feel rushed into things and may find other

[4] Indeed, data consistently show that those diagnosed with schizophrenia and bipolar disorder are more likely to die by suicide (Schmutte et al., 2021).

avenues for release. While I do not have an answer as to what these avenues may look like—my imagination unable to imagine anything that could not be easily co-opted—I think the imaginary might be a place to start. To begin by *imagining* suicide as a reality of *a life*, beyond the experiences of individual singularities.

I close with an excerpt from "Immanence: A life," the last essay that Deleuze wrote before his suicide. He writes:

> A life is the immanence of immanence, absolute immanence: it is complete power, complete bliss. […] A life is everywhere, in all the moments that a given living subject goes through that are measured by given lived objects: an immanent life carrying with it the events or singularities that are merely actualized as subjects and objects. (2005, pp. 27–29)

I find this refrain comforting, and my continued goal for this project is to figure out how to articulate "why": to translate it in such a way that it reads applicable to nonphilosophers experiencing suicidality. Or, perhaps, it may be of greater comfort to those who have experienced the loss of others to suicide.

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Part II
Suicide in Contemporary Writers as an Expression of the Will, the Dislocation Between the Individual and the Reality, and Existential Alienation

Chapter 10
The Ontological Suicide of Philipp Mainländer: A Search for Redemption Through Nothingness

Paolo Humberto Gajardo Jaña

Philipp Mainländer (born Philipp Batz) was a German philosopher who shortly after receiving the first copies of his *magnum opus* hanged himself at the age of 34. With his suicide, the young pessimistic thinker consummated his philosophical system, through an act of ontological congruence, obtaining the "redemption" of his existence. This pessimistic writer postulated a peculiar cosmogony: at the beginning of wholeness, there was a lonely God (a simple unity) who—jaded by Existence and wishing for nothingness—committed a cosmic "suicide." Through this first act (the death of God) arose the universe, condemned to die and redeem existence, achieving the nothingness. According to his cosmovision, some suicides (enlightened by *The Philosophy of Redemption*) are directed to satiate the essential will to die (*Wille zum Tode*); however, his philosophy is not a call to suicide, generally speaking. Among the published and unpublished works of Mainländer, it is possible to identify signs for his eventual suicide. To demonstrate these signs, I will examine various texts from the author: first, his main philosophical work *Die Philosophie der Erlösung*, and secondly, his nonphilosophical poetic, literary, and autobiographical writings in which the shadow of voluntary death is consistent. Through this research, Mainländer's personal suicide is understood within his philosophical system as an ontological need, in search of "redemption."

> The real philosophical act is self-killing; this is the real beginning of all philosophy, this is where all the need of the philosophical disciple goes, and only this act corresponds to all the conditions and characteristics of the transcendent act.
>
> Novalis, *Fragments II*, 1798

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1 Introduction

During the night of April 1, 1876, in Offenbach, Germany, a young autodidactic writer committed suicide. His death occurred only hours after he received the first copies of his first and only book published during his lifetime. Without context, it might be thought that his suicide—like so many others—was due to some personal grief, some impulse triggered by sadness or emotional suffering.

Had this writer not left behind a work with which he promulgated his worldview, his legacy would have been limited to that cursory remark which falls on the tomb of an anonymous suicide. However, Philipp Mainländer (born Philipp Batz) published a philosophical work by means of which it is possible to in part elucidate his enigmatic suicide. In his book entitled *Die Philosophie der Erlösung* (*The Philosophy of Redemption*), Mainländer philosophically addresses a number of topics, such as the origin of universe, the primordial existence of God, the notion of human freedom, the meaning of suicide, and the ulterior universal death.

Though the pen of the young Philipp Mainländer was not only limited to systematic philosophy as he also explored literature, poetry, and autobiography, in all these works, we can highlight Mainländer's perception of voluntary death. Mainländer approached the subject of suicide on several occasions, either explicitly, such as in his philosophical work and autobiographical fragments, or implicitly, as in his poetic and literary creations.

Consequently, the present chapter will be organized around these four sources through which it is possible to approach the phenomenon of suicide under the Mainländerian worldview. First, some central aspects of his philosophy will be outlined in order to understand the role of suicide in it. Secondly, I will interpret some of his nonphilosophical writings (poetic, literary, and autobiographical) in which the shadow of voluntary death persists. It will then be possible to understand in greater depth and detail the peculiar consideration of suicide that this author had, considering his philosophical and allegorical-literary background.

2 Mainländer's Philosophy and His Consideration of Suicide

On philosophical matters, Philipp Mainländer considered himself in debt to Arthur Schopenhauer (Mainländer, 1996a), from whom he inherited his pessimistic worldview. However, his philosophical assimilation of pessimism was not limited to a mere passive acceptance of the Schopenhauerian system, for Mainländer was quite critical of Schopenhauer on some fundamental aspects, especially regarding suicide and the metaphysical consideration of human death, for example.

In fact, Philipp Mainländer proposed a novel and fascinating pessimistic worldview. Summarizing his metaphysics, Mainländer proposes that in a time before all time, at the origin of the universe, was a God who chose his own self-annihilation in order to reach absolute nothingness, fragmenting Himself into the plurality of

individual beings that now constitute the universe, weakening little by little, moving toward total annihilation (Külpe, 1910). In this way, the primordial suicide of God was the origin of the universe; therefore, human suicide is linked to the death of God;[1] the suicide of human beings then is a sort of echo of the primordial, divine suicide (see Chap. 11 in this book).

His philosophical proposal may appear to be a mere metaphysical daydream, or a mythopoeic narrative of Schopenhauer's pessimism; however, his proposal of the God-world relationship is buttressed by rigorous philosophical argumentation (Gardner, 2020). To understand these important philosophical positions, it is necessary to outline the bases of Mainländer's system in the book which was the only witness to his hanging: *Die Philosophie der Erlösung*.

The philosophical work is divided into six parts: analytic of the cognitive faculty; physics; aesthetics; ethics; politics; and metaphysics. Through these sections, Mainländer unfolds a strictly immanent and idealistic[2] systematic philosophy that he believes answers the "enigma of the world" (Mainländer, 1996a, p. 3) and unravels the hidden meaning behind existence. Certainly, this statement is a colossal pretension, but Mainländer was convinced that he had expounded definitive answers upon completing his work, the testimony of which was his own suicide in accordance with his own metaphysical system. For this reason, Mainländer has been renowned as "the heroic pessimist, the only one willing to live – and die – by his convictions" (Beiser, 2016, p. 203).

In the first section of *The Philosophy of Redemption* (1996a), Mainländer provides a detailed analysis of human knowledge, addressing topics such as space, time, causality, etc. He does so in order to have the necessary tools to decipher the mysterious origin of the universe, that is, to satisfy the desire of human reason to determine a single point of origin: a "simple unity" (1996a, p. 28). Although these topics seem rather abstract and irrelevant to the topic of suicide, the ontological reasoning behind Mainländer's decision to commit suicide derives from that theory of the universal origin.

If we are to satisfy the human spirit's existential longing to understand the origin of the universe, Mainländer proposes that the original unity cannot be found on the same ontological plane as the universe. Consequently, he determines that whatever exists pluralistically in the universe has an immanent nature; on the other hand, whatever existed before the universe has a purely transcendent nature, that is, it possesses a completely different and unrepresentable mode of being. He warns that this transcendent and unitary plane no longer exists; that simple unity is only found in a remote past, prior to the universe: "It is a vanished, past, lost domain, and together

[1] It should be noted that the meaning of "the death of God" developed by Mainländer is totally different from the meaning that Nietzsche would later give to it in §125 of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (*The Gay Science*) (2006, pp. 90–91).

[2] The author understands the *immanent* in his system as that mandate which limits the subject matter and limits his philosophy to within the epistemological boundaries of the world. Also, he understands his *idealism* in the sense of starting his analysis from the cognizing subject, considering the external as his representation.

with it also the simple unity is vanished and lost" (Mainländer, 1996a, p. 28). Mainländer considers the sharp distinction between the past transcendent plane and the present immanent plane a great merit of his philosophy, since he maintains that both are mutually exclusive and, therefore, cannot coexist nor mix (1996b). This distinction provides him with the clarity to resolve some dilemmas related to universal origin, freedom, and necessity.

Though the author recognizes that that primordial existence cannot be described in a direct and positive way, primordial existence can only be approached negatively, characterizing it as "inactive, unextended, indistinguishable, unsplit (simple), motionless, timeless (eternal)" (Mainländer, 1996a, p. 29). It's under those characteristics he names that enigmatic unity with the term used for the most transcendental thing to all worldly reality: God (Mainländer, 1996a). By associating the "simple unity" with "God," Mainländer succeeds in making certain aspects of his metaphysics more comprehensible to readers familiar with the unfolding of the spiritual history of mankind (Invernizzi, 1994, pp. 276–277).

However, the God proposed by Mainländer is quite different from the traditional conception in theology and speculative philosophy up until then. Instead of God being a certitude that gives hope and peace of mind about the world, the Mainländerian God is quite the opposite: a dead God who is absent from the universe. According to Mainländer, "God is dead and his death was the life of the world" (1996a, p. 108).

This primordial suicide of God that Mainländer explicates, rather than being a reason to preserve life as a precious gift, is instead a reason to give life up, exhausting one's energies in weakening the sum forces in the universe. Indeed, this simple and perfect unity that was once God in a state of absolute freedom had only one decision to make: "either to remain, as he was, or to not be" (Mainländer, 1996a, p. 323). Our decadent universe attests to the fact that the original divine resolution inclined toward absolute nothingness as the absolutely best option: "Non-existence must very well have deserved the preference before the over-being, because otherwise God, in all His perfected wisdom, would not have chosen it" (Mainländer, 1996a, p. 325).

The primordial suicide initiated a cosmic process of disintegration, a sort of "self-cadaverization of God" (Volpi, 1999, p. 36) in which His essence is gradually weakened and extinguished. In other words, the multiple fragments that constitute the multiplicity of the universe are nothing more than those remnants of the divine corpse that dissolve and fade away into absolute nothingness. According to Mainländer's worldview (1996a), everything tends toward weakening and extinction, from the inorganic materials (solids, liquids, and gases)[3] to plants, to animals, to human beings. It should be noted that only mankind would be able to become aware of this original proclivity and consequently act to accelerate this process of mass dissolution.

[3] Mainländer details the process of weakening of each state of matter in §8 of his metaphysics (1996a).

This innate tendency of every being toward absolute nothingness is a kind of inheritance from that suicidal God; in each individual exists a *will to die* (Mainländer, 1996a) which unconsciously compels us to conclude the goal traced by the first divine act. Mainländer often refers to the *will to die* as the demon that uses life as a means to death (Bolea, 2021b). This *will to die* constitutes the authentic being-in-itself,[4] hidden in the depths of each being, which would only be revealed after a profound metaphysical investigation of the universe, as Mainländer believes to have done. However, the author recognizes that from a superficial point of view, it is easy to draw the opposite conclusion. In fact, in the first chapters of *Die Philosophie der Erlösung* (1996a), Mainländer tentatively hypothesizes that the being-in-itself might instead be a pure *will to live*, a term that echoes the words of Arthur Schopenhauer (2010). Mainländer retains the tentative expression "will to live" until the middle of the last section of his work, his metaphysics (1996a, p. 329), indicating that only at the end of his investigation does Mainländer reach the metaphysical height necessary to conclude with the exact opposite notion. Only from the pinnacle of his metaphysics does Mainländer succeed in identifying the ultimate meaning of all desire, that behind every longing lies the only possible goal: absolute and redemptive death. Thus, from his philosophical position, he can be receptive to the quiet desire of the universe: "Salvation! Salvation! Death of our lives! And a consoling answer: You will find annihilation and you will be saved" (Mainländer, 1996a, p. 335). This desire transcends the individual, since it would resonate in every being (including all life and inorganic materials), because the desire would be nothing less than the echo of the primordial will of God: "The will-to-death does not only act at the individual level, but it is also a form of expression of divinity and of the cosmic forces, which "conspire" for the triumph of nonbeing" (Bolea, 2021a, p. 147). In direct consonance with principles of entropy, his pessimistic system conceives reality as a continuous process of destruction, a reflection of the universal law of weakening forces (Große, 2008).

In this sense, Mainländer reflects on the future that awaits humanity, assuring that all future progress will necessarily lead to an "Ideal State" (1996a, pp. 204–207), an instance in which all major problems will be universally solved so there will be a sort of earthly paradise. In this idyllic scenario, the philosopher's pessimistic vision of existence emerges, leading him to conclude that these future citizens will be extremely jaded by the perfect monotony, and consequently, they will be able to unveil the essential misery of all existence such that they will be tired of all pleasures and will become ripe for redemption; that is to say, they will gladly leap into death.

In light of the metaphysics that Mainländer completes at the end of his work, he can judge the phenomenon of suicide among human beings with the proper height of philosophical insight. On this important point, he notably distinguishes himself from Schopenhauer.

[4] This concept must be understood as that metaphysical essence, the noumenon behind the phenomenon.

For Schopenhauer, suicide is an error in metaphysical judgement. Indeed, he considered suicide as "opposed to the attainment of the highest moral goal since it substitutes for the real salvation from this world of woe and misery one that is merely apparent" (2000, p. 309). As he details in *The World as Will and Representation*, death by one's own hand is the highest affirmation of the will to live, though the individual who commits it falls into the error of assuming that death is an apparent escape: "The person who commits suicide wills life, and is only unsatisfied with the conditions under which life has been given to him. Thus, when he destroys the individual appearance he is relinquishing only life, not the will to life" (Schopenhauer, 2010, p. 425). Despite this harsh metaphysical criticism, the father of pessimism does not judge suicide as a crime against the state or a sin against religion, only a misjudgment. Conversely, Mainländer felt that Schopenhauerian philosophy should be corrected in how it regards suicide (Seiling, 1888).

In contrast, the Mainländerian account of suicide is more indulgent because it empathizes with the weariness and suffering of those who consider anticipating their death by their own hand: "How easily the stone falls from the hand onto the grave of the suicide, how difficult, on the other hand, was the struggle of the poor man who had bedded himself so well" (Mainländer, 1996a, p. 349). This special consideration is due to the fact that suicide is a way of accelerating the destiny of the world—redemption in absolute nothingness (Ciracì, 2006)—as long as this act is also conjugated with the virginity[5] of the individual (Mainländer, 1996a). Under these conditions, human suicide can effectively eliminate both its phenomenal and noumenal aspects, i.e., both its body and its will or being-in-itself (Bolea, 2021a).

In paragraph 22 of his metaphysics, Mainländer explicitly analyzes the possibility of individuals who choose to commit suicide in the light of his philosophical proposition. In this portion of his book, Mainländer aims to dissolve a powerful belief that restricted MANY from venturing into voluntary death, writing "[t]he immanent philosophy must not condemn; it cannot. It does not call for suicide; but serving only the truth, it must destroy counter-motives of terrible violence" (1996a, p. 350). The powerful counter-motive he speaks of is the belief in a transcendent "afterlife" beyond death. That is, the mystery that many religions have used to monopolize control over life and death. Mainländer believes that many individuals have recoiled from suicide for fear of divine punishment, the unfounded fear of an illusory place of torment that awaits the living. To this notion, Mainländer adds the cruel judgments of suicides imposed by religious societies. Indeed, religious influence was a source of great indignation for the philosopher: "I insist so much on this point because, as I must openly confess, the heartless judgment of most people, especially the clergy, about the suicide is the only thing that can still deeply disgust me" (1996b, p. 218).

[5] Because if the individual left descendants, he preserves the chain of transmission of his individual will, so that death only affects him relatively (Gajardo Jaña, 2018).

In contrast, his philosophical proposal dismantles any representation of an "afterlife" beyond death (both optimistic and pessimistic), Mainländer is meticulous in pointing out that the only possible destiny is absolute nothingness:

> Beyond the world is neither a place of peace nor a place of torment, but only nothingness. Whoever enters it has neither rest nor movement, he is stateless as in sleep, only with the great difference that what is stateless in sleep no longer exists: the will is completely annihilated. (Mainländer, 1996a, pp. 350–351)

Certainly, Mainländer recognizes that this purified representation of an absolute nothingness after death can arouse different attitudes in each individual. The fact that there is no Heavenly Kingdom nor Hell to be found after life may cause some people to cling more strongly to their life, whereas it may cause other individuals to precipitate faster toward death: "This can be a new counter-motive and a new motive: this truth can drive the one back into the affirmation of the will, and pull the other powerfully into death" (Mainländer, 1996a, p. 351). In both cases, death will be a common destiny; the main difference will be that those who choose to bring forward their death will not have to fear any divine punishment after their suicide.

While Mainländer recognizes that his work is not a general exhortation to commit suicide, he warns that his philosophy will necessarily lead many individuals to their deaths. This ambivalence is explained by the fact that from his philosophical approach, he conceives the actions of each individual as the product of a specific "character" in conjunction with a sufficient motive (Mainländer, 1996a, p. 175). That is to say, his philosophical insight which rejects all illusory postulations of the afterlife must conjugate with the unique character of each individual, which is why everyone will integrate it in a different way.[6]

Mainländer does not limit the consequences of his book only to his own time and place (encouraging some of his contemporaries to commit suicide, for example). He demonstrates his work's historical significance, hoping that his philosophical clarification of the enigma of the world will initiate a process of moral enlightenment on a global scale, that is to say, that his pessimistic ideas will spread beyond all borders, so that all human beings can correctly judge the value of existence: "The pessimistic philosophy will be for the beginning historical period what the pessimistic religion of Christianity was for the past one" (Mainländer, 1996b, p. 505).

Certainly, this future global spread of pessimism should not immediately lead to a mass extinction of mankind by suicide. On the contrary, it should first unite people so that, after recognizing the true problems of the world, they work to remedy them to achieve the desired ideal state; Mainländer explains at the end of his ethics that the path of the world toward its redemption is accelerated by those who act morally (1996a). That is to say, the main consequences of this pessimism will be the social compromise for a universal progress as a prelude to redemption. However, it must

[6] An example of this combination of individual character and Mainländerian philosophy can be found in the case of Ryūnosuke Akutagawa suicide, who was influenced by his reading of *The Philosophy of Redemption*, increasing his confused anguish and thoughts on death. See Chap. 17, "The Confusing Anxiety of Ryūnosuke Akutagawa," specifically part 4, "The Farewell," in this book.

be kept in mind that the final goal will be obtained after reaching this perfect state; that is, the leap into absolute nothingness will be the product of a universal weariness of perfection: "Only by securing every good that could be gotten in life, Mainlander figured, could we know that they were not as good as nonexistence" (Ligotti, 2011, p. 35).

Any general consideration of Mainländerian pessimism must comprehend the phenomenon of personal suicide as integral to the philosophy. Suicide was an issue that deserved to be clarified from its metaphysical proposal, but following through with personal suicide, it is not the last normative conclusion that every reader should reach. Instead, the correct normative conclusion advocated with *The Philosophy of Redemption* is to completely sacrifice arbitrary social commitment, that is, to produce the material conditions of an ideal state in which humanity can take the final step toward redemption. Considering this ethic, the question then arises: why did Philipp Mainländer commit suicide instead of dedicating his life to the construction of this ideal state? The answer to this cannot be found in his theoretical approaches, but in his personal circumstances.

3 The Philosopher Behind the System: Biographical and Literary Approach to Mainländer's Suicide

In order to comprehensively understand Mainländer's suicide, it is necessary to keep in mind circumstances in his personal life that surrounded his death. Batz's family was certainly haunted by the shadow of suicide as his grandfather took his own life (Hoell, 1999), followed by Philipp's brother Daniel in 1858 (Baquedano, 2021), and later his sister Minna in 1891 after having been commissioned to publish the posthumous legacy of the deceased Mainländer (Pérez, 2015). Confiding in the close yet tense relationship with his sister, Philipp shared his concerns and dilemmas regarding how to put his own philosophy into practice.

Shortly before the completion of his philosophical system, the philosopher thought in his introspections about how he would put his work into practice. He clearly recognized that the only way to capstone his life in a way consistent to his philosophy was a total dedication to the universal; according to his own ideas, the best form of achieving this was to enlist in the German army, since in the short term, the problem of the social question would not yet be solved (Mainländer, 1925). After concluding his military service early, at the end of 1875, the author was burdened by a longing for absolute rest which, in his opinion, could only be resolved in one of two ways: a) to devote himself entirely to an active political life (in the social democratic party) as a leader promoting progress that would solve social problems or b) to rush toward his own death. He made known this dilemma to his sister Minna, hoping to find some support for his political project:

> If I am not to seek death with pleasure, after this fruit has ripened, lacking any motive, I must enter into the realm of social democracy, which will allow me to become exhausted and dazed,

> so as not to listen to the seductive voices of this longing for absolute rest, and to achieve redemption forever. […] Whether I shall prefer the repose of death to all this [active political life], and seal my doctrine with it, I do not know for the moment. (Rauschenberger, 1912, p. 124)

Unfortunately, Mainländer never found in his sister the support that would motivate him to enter political life. This lack of support can be explained by the fact the two adhered inflexibly to opposing political tendencies; Minna was in favor of a sort of intellectual aristocracy, while Philipp longed for a socialist society hand in hand with social democracy (Baquedano, 2021). It was very important for Mainländer to convince his sister to follow and support him in his political project, as he was convinced that this was the only way to continue to live coherently with his philosophy. On more than one occasion, he expressed to her in letters that he needed that external encouragement that would make him cling to life and hope for new projects. He tried unsuccessfully to persuade her, going so far as to offer her an ultimatum, expressing that it was in her hands the decision to continue creating beautiful memories together or drive him to his grave in the next six months (Rauschenberger, 1912).

Finally, after an abundant exchange of letters between the two, Mainländer gave up all hope of convincing Minna to become an ally in his social-democratic project. In 1876, he let her know that he would take the political path even if doing so distanced himself from her (Rauschenberger, 1912), for he felt the compelling need to throw himself into the midst of the whirlwind of the people to extinguish their compassion for humanity (Sommerlad, 2019). Despite having announced this resolution, he would never realize it, for he would ultimately opt for the second option: to throw himself into absolute rest by committing suicide.

Certainly, the reasons that made him change his decision are not explicit, but considering the points previously mentioned, it is understood that the author really needed that outside encouragement to jump into the turmoil of the political world. Without that factor, the only leap he could make—still coherent with his philosophy—was out of life.

Through his literary works, the author foreshadowed how death by suicide can be presented to an individual as the only possible, and therefore necessary, action. In his short novel *Rupertine del Fino*, Mainländer portrays how the protagonist is completely determined to commit suicide when she learns of the loss of her beloved. Specifically, the woman in the story says,

> [n]o power in heaven or on earth can stop the hand of death from reaching for me […] Death has pressed his seal on my forehead, – I am consecrated to it, – that has made me pure. Already I no longer belong to this world. (Mainländer, 1999b, pp. 242–243)

Similarly in his poetic sketches found in his diary *Aus dem Tagebuch eines Dichters* (*From the Diary of a Poet*), Mainländer expressed his desire to rush into a death by his own hand, which would redeem him ontologically from the burden of existence. In a poem written in 1859, he writes that he did not want to die like the fields, slowly dying out, but preferred to go toward death like the stormy wind, ending his life like a relentless lightning flash (Mainländer, 1999a). Likewise, in the poem that closes his diary, we read how he expects death to cross his being out of the book of life, so

he calls his eventual encounter with death full of calm, because he expects to find peace and redemption in it (Mainländer, 1999a).

Mainländer's contemplation of suicide encompassed his philosophy as well as his literature, poetry, and even his personal letters. Considering these writings, suicide was a topic of great importance for the author. If his philosophical statements are taken along with his personal thoughts and circumstances, we can understand how suicide presented itself as a philosophical necessity to Mainländer. Once his work had been completed and published, the only sensible prospect left for him was to put it into practice: initially working actively in politics for social progress. Though since he lacked personal support for that project, the only practical option that *The Philosophy of Redemption* allowed to its author was rendered impossible. Thus, after resigning himself to the fact that his sister did not consent to his political project, his life was presented as pointless (Sommerlad, 2019). Consequently, suicide emerged before Mainländer with full necessity, so that nothing could stop its consummation, as he had announced to Minna: "If one wants to go to death, no power of heaven and earth can stop him. The individual always faces such an event like a flood, an earthquake, and so on" (Rauschenberger, 1912, p. 129). By hanging himself, Mainländer found his own "redemption," contributing toward the cosmic process of divine fragmentation toward absolute nothingness.[7]

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[7] I would like to thank Joseph Mertes—whom I met at the presentation of this work at the conference *I want to die*—for his help in improving the translation of my chapter.

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Chapter 11
Simone Weil, Martyr or Suicidal? Between Martyrdom and Suicide: The Question of the Meaning of Life and Death

Myriam Rodríguez del Real

The research lines of the chapter will be directed to the dialogue between suicide and martyrdom as two acts with certain similarities and differences in order to establish parallels and find the lines of escape. I wanted to frame these similarities and differences within the question of the meaning of life and death as the key to understanding the difference between a suicidal and a martyr, trying to get away from the religious tinge with which the issue has been treated historically. Thus, to place Simone Weil, one of the great French philosophers of the twentieth century, in the middle of the question to ask ourselves, and to clarify through her work, if perhaps Weil's death, around which there is a great debate, turns the activist-philosopher into a suicidal or a martyr. We are in 1943, the Second World War is happening. Simone Weil has just been admitted into the hospital—because of the illness she was suffering from—where she refused to eat. In that moment she wrote a letter to Maurice Schumman, one of the persons who fought the most for the freedom of France. She wrote him: "I can note at the bread of the English without having participated in their war effort." My purpose is to clarify what happened with Weil's death and if we can consider her, as we have said, a martyr or a suicidal.

1 Introduction: Simone Weil's Choice of Life and the Conditions of Her Death

> God created out of love and for love.
> God created nothing
> nothing but love and the means of love.
> He created all forms of love. He created beings capable of love in all possible

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possible distances.
He himself came, for no one else could do it,
to the maximum distance, to the infinite distance.
This infinite distance between God and God,
a supreme tearing apart, a pain to which no one can
that no one else can approach,
the wonder of love, is the crucifixion of God.
Simone Weil, *Disordered thoughts*, 1962

On August 26, 1943, at the Grosvenor Sanatorium in London, the coroner completed the report of a patient who had died two days earlier: Simone Weil. The report stated that the cause of death was "cardiac arrest due to muscular degeneration of the myocardium as a result of starvation and pulmonary tuberculosis" (Pétrement, 1997, p. 721). There was also the following statement by way of moral judgement: "The deceased caused her own death by stopping eating while she was losing her mental equilibrium" (Pétrement, 1997, p. 721). There have been many attempts to dismantle the figure of Simone Weil and to take away her authority, especially her mystical experiences, by insinuating that she lacked mental equilibrium and considering these experiences to be hallucinations. From now on, and in the next pages, I am going to talk about the death of Simone Weil, which creates so much debate, and try to answer the question of whether Weil was suicidal or a martyr, reviewing these two concepts from an ontological point of view.

She is usually described as "[a] mystic who participated in the Labor Movement" (Fernández Buey, 2020, p. 11), who did not withdraw into the silence of religious life. There is a desire in Weil that both her life and her theory should be ethically committed to the transformation of reality. Thus, her thought would not remain only on the theoretical level but would become action, movement, giving her body into battle on several occasions, in the factory with the workers, in the streets, etc.

Simone Weil's historical context is of great importance for understanding her thought and her course in life, her choices, and even her death. Josep Otón, one of the experts on Weil, says that the "thinker was a witness to the main events of the first half of the twentieth century: the First World War, Stalinism, the crisis of 1929, fascism and Nazism, the Spanish Civil War and, finally, the Second World War" (2020, p. 104). Thus, during the World War II, near the time of her death, she was part of the French Resistance in London. Throughout her life, she wanted to be close to the oppressed, but not only spiritually but also physically. Thus, Weil refused any kind of privilege, even when she was in the hospital in the last days of her life.

Her detachment from herself and her body was combined with her vocation for the other, for the afflicted (in English they traduce *malheur*—the original concept—for affliction; but *malheur* is more like disgrace) and her desire to be at the side of those who suffer the most. This thinking and desire made her to give up good living conditions for the sake of others. For example, she donated part of her food ration to people who were in greater need than she was. Thus, she refused to eat more food than her fellow French soldiers could eat. In the introduction of *The Need for Roots*, the Spanish edition, Juan Ramón Capella (2014) describes her as a person who always identified herself to the core with the excluded, the humiliated, those who bore the burden of injustice and inequality, that is, the multiform suffering humanity.

Simone de Beauvoir says of Weil:

> China had just been ravaged by a great famine and I had been told that, on hearing the news, she had burst into tears: these tears commanded my respect even more than her philosophical gifts. I envied a heart capable of beating across the entire universe. One day I managed to approach her. I no longer know how the conversation began; she declared in a curt tone that only one thing counted on earth today: the revolution that would feed the whole world. I replied, no less peremptorily, that the problem was not to make men happy, but to find a meaning to their existence. He looked at me from one landmark to the next: "You've never been hungry", she said. (1980, pp. 247–248)

Did she let herself die or did she die because of her poor health: tuberculosis, constant and severe headaches, etc.? The answer to this question is only one reading among many, as her end has been debated, and it is difficult to classify. It is marked by poor physical health due to a prolonged state of headaches and a diagnosis of tuberculosis, asceticism, political solidarity with the French workers, etc. On the other hand, it becomes a little clearer that it makes less sense to speak of suicide in Simone Weil, given what we have been discussing. In fact, Weil did not reject pain and suffering. Instead, and from the experience of her own suffering, she opened herself up to the pain of others, pain that she wanted to share and accompany from a life without luxuries (Pétrement, 1997).

Francisco Fernández Buey says in his work *Sobre Simone Weil. El compromiso con los desdichados* (2020) that no other twentieth-century thinker had been able to understand human suffering and affliction in the way that Weil did. This understanding undoubtedly has a religious and mystical dimension. But what is genuine about Weil is that this was never separated from social concern.

Weil is said to have self-inflicted pain, but the point is in the reasons that led her not so much to seek her own suffering for the sake of suffering but to accompany the suffering of others by appropriating it. Weil says:

> The suffering all over the world obsesses and overwhelms me to the point of annihilating my faculties and the only way I can revive them and release myself from the obsession is by getting for myself a large share of danger and hardship. (1965, p. 156)

All in all, I turn to the question of whether Weil is suicidal or a martyr, or perhaps neither. I would like to point out that it is not a matter of establishing a moral judgment on the question but of providing us with the tools to be able to make a reading of Weil's death, one of many. As her friend Simone Pétrement puts it in her biography *Life of Simone Weil* (1997), by selecting we are choosing what is remarkable and what can be forgotten about this person's life.

2 Suicide and Martyrdom: Where the Gaze Is Placed

First of all, I will try to rethink the terms "suicide" and "martyrdom" outside the Christian dichotomous coordinates where the martyr is the one who gives his life for God and therefore a hero, and the suicide is a coward who does not love life. So,

we need to ask ourselves where it is located, our freedom, and what is the meaning of our life—and our death—if there were any.

The beginning of our life is not a choice of our free will—Chesterton already said in his work *Orthodoxy*: "We all belong to this world before we begin to ask ourselves whether we like belonging to it" (1909, p. 118)—but we fall (without the term "fall" having a negative connotation) into the world, a world that constitutes us as *being-in-the-world* without which our existence would not be possible. Existence shapes our essence, as is proclaimed in existentialism, *existence precedes essence*.

Simon Critchley, philosopher and Professor of Philosophy at the New School for Social Research in New York, in his book *Notes on Suicide* (2015), speaks of Jesus Christ as the first suicide in history. In the same way, Borges writes in *El Biathanatos* about John Donne's work of the same name: "to indicate that Christ committed suicide. This baroque idea is glimpsed behind the Biathanatos. That of a god who makes the universe in order to make his gallows" (1984, p. 702). Is Christ suicidal or a martyr? Is Simone Weil suicidal or a martyr?

We must turn to the question of the meaning of life, the why of existence and of death in order to ask ourselves about suicide and martyrdom, and having clarified that we do not choose the beginning of our life, we must ask ourselves whether there is freedom to choose the end of it. Radicati, in his *Philosophical Dissertation on Death* (1732), makes a defense of suicide by appealing to the free will of the individual to choose his or her own death. Is suicide a free choice?

Suicide is the act of ending one's own life because one considers nonexistence more satisfying, reassuring, in conclusion: better than existence. This is due, in most cases, to situations of extreme suffering, whether physical or psychological, which prevents the person from living life in a dignified and fulfilling way and, therefore, creates a desire for it to end. Life becomes an absurd affair, says Camus: "the exact extent to which suicide is a solution of the absurd […] Belief in the absurdity of existence must then dictate his conduct" (1975, p. 14), and it is this absurdity of existence that leads to considering it as something not valuable, "not worthwhile."

Defending suicide as a free act should lead us to be able to affirm that each person enjoys "total dominion, ownership and sovereignty over [his/her] own person" (Critchley, 2015, p. 14). To affirm this would be not only innocent but wrong because a) we live in society and we are co-dependent beings, that is, we depend on each other for our existence, and b) it would mean denying that there are a series of material conditions that shape our economic, cultural, and religious context and determine in a positive or negative way the opportunities we are offered, the decisions we make, etc. (see Chap. 13 in this book).

In both suicide and martyrdom, death is not something that is desired per se (even though in the case of suicide, the person causes him or herself to die, and in the case of martyrdom, it is an external agent who performs the act of ending his life), but a decision that is taken given a situation in which living is not an option, for different reasons, respectively, reasons that are external agents: in the case of suicide, because life has been stripped of all meaning, and in the case of martyrdom, because someone external wants to strip his life of a meaning that is outside themselves, that is, beyond the martyr.

Descartes, in order to argue for the existence of God, used an argument that was later included in the group of *ontological arguments*:[1]

> If from the fact that I can draw from my thought the idea of a thing, it follows that everything that I clearly and distinctly perceive as belonging to that thing belongs to it, does it not follow that I can draw from this an argument that proves the existence of God? Certainly, I find in myself his idea—that is, the idea of a supremely perfect being—[…] so that it is no less repugnant to conceive of a God [that is, a supremely perfect being] who lacks existence [that is, who lacks a perfection], than it is repugnant to conceive of a mountain who lacks a valley. (2008, p. 47)

The French philosopher concludes that having the idea of a supremely perfect being in our mind, that being must exist because it is more perfect to exist than not to exist. So, existence being more perfect than nonexistence, we reiterate that no one in a worthy and full condition chooses to cease to exist rather than to exist.

Suicide is an act that is born of oneself and whose gaze does not transcend the "I." Rather than the meaninglessness in which the suicide seems to be lodged and which leads him to end his life; if there is a meaning, this meaning does not transcend our "I" and its circumstances. It is precisely the lack of meaning that gives meaning to suicide: to free oneself from the bonds of a society that suffocates.

The gaze of the martyr, on the other hand, is a gaze that transcends the self and looks at the face of others, which goes out of itself, opens up to the completely other and recognizes in this "outside of itself" a meaning that surpasses it and goes beyond itself; meaning, that is what constitutes his life and, therefore, for which he is ready to die. In this way, "the martyr is resistance, life that rushes upon life" (Bolton, 2020, p. 3).

The martyr does not want to die, but an external agent imposes this choice on him. This decision makes him choose between his life—but renouncing that "other" which transcends him and shapes his meaning—or death. The martyr responds by donating his life for this meaning-cause against the power that tries to impose meaninglessness on his life. So, he actually gives life for life because his death transcends death through that cause or meaning. Chesterton says in his work *Orthodoxy*:

> A martyr is someone who appreciates what surrounds him so much that he renounces his own life […] he is noble, exactly because (however much he renounces the world or execrates all humanity) he admits that last link with life: he dies so that something may live […] A suicide is someone who cares so little about what surrounds him that he wishes to see it disappear […] he is ignoble because he lacks that link with being: he is a mere destroyer, spiritually he destroys the universe. (1909, p. 131)

Thus, the difference between the two figures is not in the question of the act; it is not the performance of the act or the hands that do it (whether their own or someone else's), nor whether it is a free act or not, or whether there is meaning in the act itself that differentiates suicide from martyrdom. Instead, it is the question of the transcendence of the cause, of the meaning that guides the act that establishes a radical distance between the two, that is, the question of a meaning outside oneself in the

[1] The first to develop an ontological argument (a priori deductive argument for the existence of God) was St. Anselm in his work *Proslogium*.

case of martyrdom (as we have noted above) or the non-transcendence of meaning (which does not transcend the suicide, but remains in the "I").

The martyr is a witness, not only as the person who bears witness, but as the one who witnesses, sees, and therefore believes, and therefore his way of transmitting ("passing the witness") will be passionate and confident. If the witness witnesses that meaning for which he gives his life, can he not do it? Can we refuse such a great love—let's say that the meaning is God—that you have witnessed and known? How can we say no?

3 Simone Weil as a Martyr: The Commitment with the Afflicted and the Concept of *Decreation*

Returning to Simone Weil, I do not intend to conclude the debate on her death but to draw a concrete reading that moves away from the idea that Weil wished to die and was therefore suicidal. A more widespread reading that moves away from the image of Weil as suicidal is the one that focuses on the fact that the meaning that ran through Weil's life and death was located outside herself, transcending her person in the search for justice for the oppressed, for those who suffer the most. She was a person of great moral rigidity, and the obligation to stand by the side of the suffering and not to allow herself better living conditions than they could have was a moral imperative. In her friend Simone Pétrement's *Life of Simone Weil*, a work that traces the entire life of the philosopher from a privileged position as a friend of hers, she collects Weil's sentence:

> I ardently desire to do whatever is required of me, without any privilege […] I desire that my time and the course of my thoughts, in so far as they depend on the body, be subjected to the same necessities that any farm labourer suffers. (1997, p. 593)

I do not want to expand on this point in order to move on, but if anyone is interested in this aspect, Pétrement's biography describes toward the end in great detail all the testimonies of the people who accompanied Weil to her end, as well as of Weil herself.

Weil says in a letter to Father Perrin about her experience in the factory:

> I was, as it were, in pieces, soul and body. That contact with affliction [*malheur*] had killed my youth. Until then I had not had any experience of affliction, unless we count my own, which, as it was my own, seemed to me, to have little importance, […] I knew quite well that there was a great deal of affliction in the world, I was obsessed with the idea, but I had not had prolonged and first-hand experience of it. (1973, p. 66)

This experience made her aware of the condition of human affliction (the famous *malheur*), existing in a world plagued by affliction and suffering. In *Disordered Thoughts* (1995), Weil said that to project our being onto the disgraced, the wretched is to assume their affliction, although this has only been realized by Christ on the cross. This struggle for justice for Weil translates into a desire to give one's life to love for one's neighbor, charity, and communion with the suffering of the other. In

the words of Christ, "I was hungry and you gave me to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me to drink" (Mt 25:35–36).

On the other hand, it is of great interest to pay attention to the concept of *decreation* which she introduces in her work *Gravity and Grace*. This idea allows us to establish a certain parallelism between the figure of Christ and that of Weil. God's creation, says this text, is an act of complete love. And it is precisely in this act of God's love that he *decreates*, he withdraws so that we can love him; that is, he renounces his omnipotence in order to endow us with freedom and autonomy, so that we can choose to love him. In the act of creating, God divests himself of part of his being, he *decreates* himself. And Weil said: "God gave me being in order that I should give it back to him" (2002, p. 40). Weil distinguishes between destruction, which is "to make the created pass into nothingness," and *decreation*, which is "to make the created pass into the uncreated" (2002, p. 32). And here we can see the distance between suicide and martyrdom that we were talking about.

Thus, we should renounce to be something of our own by imitating the divine act (Weil, 2002). So, the Bible says: "Christ, being divine … emptied himself [kenosis] by taking the form of a slave" (Phil 2:6–7). We are to respond to the renunciation, to God's sacrifice, with our renunciation and sacrifice, that is, to make ourselves nothing in God, as Christ did on the cross and as Weil did in the last days of her life. I do not think I see in Weil's words a kind of apology and desire for death, but rather a total abandonment in God, an abandonment and renunciation that consists in being an instrument of his love. And this is shown with great clarity in her dedication to the most afflicted. Thus, it is said in the *Acts* of the Apostles: "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:24–28).

Jesus becomes flesh to accompany the unhappiness, the human suffering that is a condition of existence in a world mired in disgrace. Thus, we can also see Weil as taking up the baton of Christ's way and becoming flesh in human misery, accompanying it in an incarnate way, not so much out of a desire for masochism or absolute self-contempt, but out of a love for the other and a desire for justice and goodness. The key is to understand Weil as imitating Christ himself, who is God decreated, divesting himself out of love and becoming incarnate in order to accompany human pain in a suffering existence,[2] in the same way as Weil will do. For this reason, and according to the difference between suicide and martyrdom, we cannot speak of a suicide as such, since the meaning, the cause, is situated outside herself, and we can locate it in this desire to detach herself from the self to "the other" through Christ.

We have been able to trace through her work and writings, not a series of suicidal ideas that might give us clues to a kind of will to end her life. Instead, and on the one hand, this detachment from her individual and bodily existence (through the concept of decreation, which would belong more to the plane of her metaphysical theory), this surrender to the pain of the other (which would be part of her more political position), both of which, together with Weil's moral rectitude, lead her to a total surrender of her individual life. Weil says in *The Need for Roots*: "However

[2] Indeed, Weil (1973) calls Christianity the religion of the slaves in *Waiting for God*.

beautiful the intonation of a cry of pain may be, one cannot wish to hear it any longer; it is more humane to wish to heal the pain" (2014, p. 56). And this is the reason we can speak about Simone Weil as a martyr herself.

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Chapter 12
The Fall of a Legend: Deleuze's Suicide and His Spinoza

María de las Mercedes López Mateo

Gilles Deleuze committed suicide in 1995 at the age of 70. By the time of his death, he had severe respiratory problems and needed an oxygen tank to breathe. In 1968, he had already been diagnosed with tuberculosis, and one of his lungs had to be removed. Despite the exhausting efforts he had to make in those last years to accomplish any daily activity, Deleuze was always recognized as a staunch vitalist philosopher and scholar of the vitalist tradition of thought. To mention the most significant in his studies: Bergson, Nietzsche, and, especially, Spinoza. About the latter, whom he called with affection "the prince of philosophers," he once said: "He more than any other gave me the feeling of a gust of air pushing you from behind every time you read him, of a witch's broom which he makes you mount." Moreover, Deleuze shared with Spinoza his position regarding life: "For Spinoza, life is not an idea or something theoretical, it's a manner of being, the same eternal manner in all of its aspects." Of course, he was also aware of his position on suicide as an impossibility due to its self-destructive nature. He mentions this in his work *Spinoza: philosophie pratique*, in reference to the Dutchman's *Ethics*. How can this be consistent with Deleuze's suicide? Does suicide attend to a plexus of internal coherence between philosophical thought and the state of health, physical, and mental? This chapter explores whether Deleuze's suicide ideation was indeed present, against all odds, in his philosophical works.

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1 Introduction and Preliminary Matters

Gilles Deleuze committed suicide in November 1995 at the age of 70, by throwing himself out of the window of his apartment in Paris. By the time of his death, he had severe respiratory problems and needed an oxygen tank to breath. In 1968, he had already been diagnosed with tuberculosis, and one of his lungs had to be removed. Despite the exhausting efforts he had to make in those last years to accomplish any daily activity, Deleuze was always recognized as a strong vitalist philosopher and scholar of the vitalist tradition of thought. To mention the most significant in his studies, Bergson, Nietzsche, and Spinoza are worth highlighting. About the latter, whom he called with affection "the prince of philosophers," he once said in an interview with Frédéric Worms: "He more than any other gave me the feeling of a gust of air pushing you from behind every time you read him, of a witch's broom which he makes you mount" (Dosse, 2010, p. 143). Thanks to Deleuze, the reading and study of Spinoza have been refreshed after centuries of systematic neglect. Doubtlessly, Deleuze succeeds in popularizing the image of Spinoza as the philosopher of life and joy.

Furthermore, Deleuze shared with Spinoza his position about life. Talking to Thomas Bénatouil, Deleuze stated that "for Spinoza, life is not an idea or something theoretical, it's a manner of being, the same eternal manner in all of its aspects" (Dosse, 2010, p. 144). As it will be clarified in subsequent pages, he was also aware of his position on suicide as an impossibility due to its self-destructive nature. Deleuze mentions this in his work *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* (1988) in reference to the Dutchman's *Ethics*. Hence, the question that concerns us in the current analysis is the following: how can this be consistent with Deleuze's suicide? Should Deleuze's suicide be considered paradoxical in relation to his Spinozist vitalism?

Some prior disclaimers about the methodology and the object of research that defines the course of this book would be necessary before the concrete analysis of Deleuze's suicide. Each chapter focuses its efforts on a chosen contemporary author who would have committed suicide in order to seek in their works the correlation that we already knew to exist: a will to die that emerges in writing. Besides the problem of having the answer to a research question before doing the actual research, there is also the imminent danger of rushing into the fallacy commonly known as *cherry picking*. As is well-known, this is one of the simplest pitfalls in research, especially in the social sciences, since it involves the partial selection of those cases—in our exercise, those texts or citations—that confirm our hypothesis, stressing them while completely ignoring the evidence that may contradict us. With this in mind, it seems crucial not only to take into consideration the citations that could reveal an approach to suicide but also the author's thought as a whole. Knowing how their thought operates will make it easier to adjust the general question of this book to the specific case of study, especially when dealing with a philosopher as unique as Gilles Deleuze.

2 Playing Detective with Deleuze and His Work

First and foremost, it would be legitimate to wonder: when the texts we are addressing are philosophical treatises, do they communicate the truth of the writer in the same way as literature does? Do the philosophical arguments of a scholar reveal the same content about the author as the emotion-filled stories of a novelist? Thus, should the methodology be the same when our subject of study is a philosopher, a poet, or a novelist?

It is widely known that Deleuze deeply rejected media events (at least this was the case until the recording of the *Abécédaire* in 1988, which was his philosophical testament). Deleuze rejected in these encounters the exercise of interrogating the author as a differentiated element of his work, as if a different truth than the written one would arise through this dialogue. Be that as it may, as René Schérer will say about his friend and colleague at the Université de Vincennes, "the truth of a man is in the written, even if the written is never focused on itself" (1998, p. 18). In Deleuze's case, "the whole of himself is in his books" (1998, p. 19). And yet, and this is essential for my thesis, this "whole" must not be interpreted in an essentialist way. Considering an author such as Deleuze, thinking in these terms would be an absolute contradiction as well as a great inaccuracy.

In *Critical and Clinical* (1998), Deleuze claims that "writing is inseparable from becoming" (p. 1). Writing brings out combinations and possibilities that in ordinary language slip through our fingers due to massive formations. That is why, for Deleuze, it is the writer who must be listened to, because it is through his exercise that he is able to access life and its singularities or *haecceities*. Deleuze's thinking and writing overcome unitary and heavy identities to make way for events.

This becomes a problem for the purpose of this research. Not only do we find ourselves facing the aforementioned problem—since we are tracing an answer we already know and want to discover—but we are also applying the rules of this detective game to an author who cannot be trapped by any kind of pre-established rule. With Deleuze, the given guidelines are useless because sense is being constructed constantly in its pure becoming. We see this in *The Logic of Sense* (1990), in the 10th series, entitled "Of the ideal game." Deleuze uses the example of Lewis Carroll's Alice to describe this type of game that we do not fully understand because they have no specific rules, nor winners or losers, and with astonishing speed, they begin and end whenever they want to, like the croquet match in which the mallets are pink flamingos. In these *ideal games*, "there are no preexisting rules, each move invents its own rules; it bears upon its own rule" (Deleuze, 1990, p. 59). As opposed to conventional games in which chance is already pre-established, fixed at certain specific moments like the movement of roulette or dice, he proposes imagining *pure games* that spread out chance at each moment, assigning singularities without a fixed sense.

It is relevant at this point to bring to light that example precisely because the same happens with Deleuze's thought, which is the best example of this *ideal game*: impossible to be controlled by pre-existing rules. Thus, should we reformulate the

rule-question of this project for the specific case of Deleuze? It is even possible to look for rules in his thought that would allow establishing the logical correlation wanted between his texts and his suicide, if everything is full of open events and possibilities.

For those readers who may not be familiar with Deleuze's philosophy, I shall digress briefly at this point. What should we understand by an *event*? Although it is a profound and vast concept, it will only be focused on those aspects of it that are essential to our general thesis. Following Deleuze in *Negotiations*:

> There are various ways of looking at concepts. For ages people have used them to determine what something is (its essence). We, though, are interested in the circumstances in which things happen: in what situations, where and when does a particular thing happen, how does it happen, and so on? A concept, as we see it, should express an event rather than an essence. (1995, p. 25)

Thus, when reference is made to an event, it alludes to a fluctuating composition, which is in constant change, without beginning or end, and not to a fixed essence or characteristic. And this, of course, we must also apply to the question of the suicidal character of Deleuze himself and his texts. Wondering whether Deleuze's writings contained this essence would certainly be to miss the point of his own philosophy. We would be using the wrong tools for this particular case. If so, the right question to ask is: under what conditions was Deleuze's suicide possible? Moreover, if the plurality of the event is always an open and dynamic system that generates new, unpredictable, and unexpected lines, can we even look for indications that this suicide might one day in the future take place? In Deleuze's words: "There is no general prescription. We have done with all globalizing concepts. Even concepts are *haecceities*, events" (Deleuze & Parnet, 1987, p. 144).

In any case, and keeping all this Deleuzian background in mind, let me return to the initial question: was there any possibility of predicting the event of Deleuze's suicide by reading his work? Could suicide be expected from one of the philosophers of vitalism of the twentieth century? Does it make sense that the one who renewed Spinoza would eventually commit the most impossible act for him, that is, suicide?

Of course, Deleuze was aware that suicide was an impossibility for Spinoza. While the second edition of his *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* was being published in 1981, Deleuze devoted the months of December 1980 to March 1981 to give a seminar at the Université de Vincennes to review Spinoza's philosophy: *Spinoza: The Velocities of Thought*. There, Deleuze mentioned his position on suicide in the seventh lecture on January 20:

> You commit an action; well, then you will not be looking into the action to see if it is good or bad. In a sense, even any action is good insofar as it expresses a power of action (*puissance*), the power of action of your body, whether it is good in this sense, unless you launch into an action which indeed suppresses, which destroys the relation of your body, that is, into a suicidal action. But, to the extent that it expresses a power of action in your body, it is good. (1980–1981b, p. 2)

Here, Deleuze is referring to Spinoza's *Ethics*, to Part IV, proposition 20, where it is said:

> No one, I say, refuses food or kills himself from a necessity of his nature, but only when forced by external causes. […] It is impossible that a man, from the necessity of his nature, should endeavor not to exist. (Spinoza, 1954, p. 204)

From both passages, it is possible to deduce—and it is essential for the sake of my thesis—that for both Deleuze and his master, there is no such thing as a death drive. This is certainly not incompatible with being able to trace signs of his future suicide, but in no case provoked by a sort of death drive in the purest psychoanalytic tradition.

3 Two Interpretations of a Paradox

During the months following Deleuze's suicide, many of his colleagues paid tribute to him in newspapers such as *Libération*. They tried to figure out the cryptic meaning of their friend's death there. Because it had to have a meaning. In this regard, an imperative article for any review of the existing literature is the one written by André Pierre Colombat (1996) entitled "November 4, 1995: Deleuze's death as an event." It summarizes with extreme precision the set of theories that were developed at that time.

Accordingly, there are two ways to justify the paradox that, indeed, a) Deleuze agreed with the Spinozist assumptions about the impossibility of suicide, while at the same time, b) his texts were open to the possibility of the suicide of the author.

First of all, his terrible health condition turned out to be completely disabling for any task of his daily life, for the development of his possibilities. As much as the power of bodies is life, as much as the proper of the being is self-preservation (Spinoza, 1954), Deleuze's body was not capable of bearing anything else. That limit towards which the conatus tends had come to an end; the perseverance of his being was exhausted. His aged body was deteriorated by tuberculosis, the lack of a lung, his asthma crises, and his complete dependence on an oxygen tank. Deleuze dedicates his fifth lecture of *Spinoza: The Velocities of Thought* on January 6, 1981, to the relation between the typologies of illness and suicide from Spinoza's point of view. Without being able to go deeply into it, Deleuze includes *aging* as a type of "illness," where internal biological mechanisms fail increasingly (Deleuze, 1980–1981a, p. 21). While also speaking of internal diseases in which an organism gradually stops working,[1] he brings up these words of Spinoza in the scholium of proposition 39 (Part IV):

> No reason compels me to maintain that the body does not die unless it is changed into a corpse. And, indeed, experience seems to urge a different conclusion. Sometimes a man undergoes such changes that I should hardly have said he was the same man. (Deleuze, 1988, p. 34)

[1] Oddly enough, he gives the example of the respiratory system, as would later be his case.

The letter Deleuze wrote to Noelle Châtelet two weeks before committing suicide would confirm this theory. Noelle was the widow of his Vincennes classmate, François Châtelet. According to her, it was written in trembling and with difficulty: "he wrote […] to tell me that he didn't want to live through what François had lived through" (Dosse, 2010, p. 497). Deleuze was already noticing that his ability to work, read, and, in general, develop the potential that a life deserves was falling apart, and he did not want to attend to this suffering and absolute deterioration. In conclusion, we are facing a body that was barely alive (even with artificial external help) but whose power was completely consumed, so he could not stand it any longer.

Secondly, there is another way of justifying the coherence or predictability of Deleuze's suicide regarding his work and thought, although, as we shall see, both are related and will eventually converge. Now I will not consider his suicide from the point of view of his biological fatigue but as the last and most extreme vitalist act (see Chap. 9 in this book), as the *apotheosis of the will*.

It is well known that both Deleuze and Guattari (1983) constantly encouraged experimentation through the body. They pushed the Spinozist question to its limit: "what is a body capable of?" "What affects are you capable of?" However, they also insisted on the need for prudence to make desire ludic and lucid, without diluting ourselves in it. We see this, for example, in his *Dialogues*, in the text "On Spinoza":

> Experiment, but you need a lot of prudence to experiment. We live in a world which is generally disagreeable, where not only people but the established powers have a stake in transmitting sad affects to us. Sadness, sad affects, are all those which reduce our power to act. (Deleuze & Parnet, 1987, p. 61)

He mentions again the same danger in the recording of his *Abécédaire*, in "D as in Desire," only seven years before committing suicide: "I can't stand it, especially young people... […] I can't stand a young person cracking up, it's just unbearable" (Deleuze & Parnet, 1996). However, he continues to speak, making indeed a great revelation: "An old man who cracks up, who commits suicide even, he at least has already lived his life, but a young person who cracks up, out of stupidity (*par connerie*), out of carelessness..." (Deleuze & Parnet, 1996). We find here a vindication of action. It is a vindication of experimentation even with those *bad encounters*[2] that can destroy a part of us. Tightening the limits of *what is a body capable of*, *how far a body can go*, also implies tinkering, playing around with those things that can reduce our power, such as alcohol or drugs, but always doing so with caution.

Or perhaps not always. Here we can already appreciate the research question of this project on *suicide in modern literature* applied to Deleuze, the essential detail that had been pointed out. In this particular case of study, the inquiry cannot seek an outright affirmative or negative answer about committing suicide (was suicide foreseeable, yes or no?). Contrariwise, it will rather have to inquire about the

[2] "When I have a bad encounter, this means that the body which is mixed with mine destroys my constituent relation or tends to destroy one of my subordinate relations" (Deleuze, 1978, p. 6). Therefore, a bad encounter, in Deleuzian terminology, is whatever that reduces my power. In an extreme case, death may be considered a bad encounter.

circumstances in which it might or might not occur (under what conditions could it happen?). If we refer to suicide when someone has already exhausted the potential of his life, it does not seem to worry Deleuze too much.

There is one last text where his vitalism shows some room for suicide. This text, furthermore, brings us back to the question of the *event* where we began this ideal game of thought. It is the twenty-second series of *The Logic of Sense*, entitled "Porcelain and volcano." There, Deleuze subscribes to Blanchot's reading on death:

> Death as event, inseparable from the past and future into which it is divided, never present, an impersonal death, the 'ungraspable, that which I can not grasp, for it is not bound to me by any sort of relation, which never comes and toward which I do not go'. And the personal death, which occurs and is actualized in the most harsh present whose 'extreme horizon (is) the freedom to die and to be able to risk oneself mortally.' (1990, p. 156)

In this work, suicide is shown "as the wish to bring about the coincidence of the two faces of death" (Deleuze, 1990, p. 156). Suicide removes death as a future. It is the individual determination that extracts death from the future place to bring it to the event of the current moment. Thus, the impersonal of death is compromised in a personal death; it is inscribed in a concrete body that succeeds in capturing the eternal truth of the event. In Deleuze's words in *Dialogues*: "The haecceity of a death which is no longer that of a person, but the extraction of a pure event – at its *own* time, on its *own* plane" (Deleuze & Parnet, 1987, p. 140).

4 Conclusions: The Aphorism of Life

Finally, taking everything aforementioned into account, it could be concluded that none of these fragments that we have been pointing out, by themselves, would explain the paradoxical phenomenon that was the suicide of the greatest vitalist of the twentieth century, of the greatest reader of Spinoza. Just as no single essence gives shape to what we read as a "subject," but rather exists as a heterogeneous confluence, a rhizomatic structure with a multitude of lines of flight and singularities, so we must congregate Deleuze's texts to understand and, perhaps, anticipate this event.

Obviously, we know that for Spinoza in no case would be acceptable to assume that someone would want to commit suicide "from the necessity of his own nature" (1954, p. 204). It would only make sense if it were provoked by external causes. However, although Deleuze inherits this tradition, he also does so from Stoicism (something that Spinoza himself does on certain occasions). Therefore, we do not speak of a desire to die. But we *do* speak of a desire to live the right sort of life: "To begin with, there is an average duration of existence: given a relation, there is an average duration in which it can be realized" (Deleuze, 1988, p. 42). To understand the event of his suicide in relation to his philosophy, we must not lose sight of the most simple and obvious: "Deleuze's entire philosophy is a hymn to life, an affirmation of life" (Schérer, 1998, p. 16). Philosophy and life are inseparable in Deleuze.

He makes this explicit from Nietzsche, who also greatly influenced him, in *The Logic of Sense*:

> Nietzsche has at his disposal a method of his own invention. We should not be satisfied with either biography or bibliography; we must reach a secret point where the anecdote of life and the aphorism of thought amount to one and the same thing. (Deleuze, 1990, p. 128)

The *aphorism of life* and the *anecdote of thought*. Deleuze himself immediately gives as an example the suicide of Empedocles by throwing himself into the Etna. Deleuze understands Empedocles' act as a vital sign that carried pre-Socratic thought about nature until its ultimate consequences: "The pre-Socratic philosopher does not leave the cave; on the contrary, he thinks that we are not involved enough or sufficiently engulfed therein" (Deleuze, 1990, p. 128). In both cases, despite their differences, we would find ourselves dealing with existential gestures that would reflect the nature of their thought. These are anecdotes that are congruent with their philosophical corpus until the greatest of extremes, until the worst of encounters: death.

In Deleuze, we find a stoic acceptance of the arrival of death: acceptance of the exhaustion of his power due to his illness and advanced age, of the end of his days of experimentation… and it is precisely an acceptance moved by his love to life. The aphorism of life that Deleuze leaves us with his suicide is expressed by Bousquet, whom he also considers a stoic: it's the "apotheosis of the will" (Deleuze, 1990, p. 149).

Finally, however, one last question remains to be resolved: does *prediction* mean the same thing as *prevention*? Let us dwell on this. From what has been seen until now, we have established that Deleuze's suicide was predictable according to his *aphorisms of life*, his *anecdotes of thought*. Anyone reading his texts today or 30 years ago, when he had not yet committed suicide, could have intuited that this possibility was open given the right circumstances.

This chapter has attempted to illustrate how Deleuze defended and loved life above anything else. But not at any cost. Not just any life. Deleuze did not stop persevering in his being, and for that reason precisely when it stopped being possible, he accepted the end of his self-preservation. To love life is perhaps the purest way to recognize when it must come to an end. We have not found in Deleuze a psychoanalytic death drive, but rather the stoic acceptance of a man who was already at the gates of natural death and who only wanted to preserve his agency and power until the last moment.

Consequently, was there really a chance to prevent such suicide? How does the qualitative leap take place from textual identification in our research to actual prevention? Like any honest philosophical exercise, that is, without a clear answer, let me remain with these words that Deleuze dedicates to the Stoics:

> So that, agents or patients, when we act or undergo, we must always be worthy of what happens to us. Stoic morality is undoubtedly this: not being inferior to the event. […] A love of life which can say yes to death. (Deleuze & Parnet, 1987, p. 65)

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Chapter 13
Is Suicide a Choice? Suicide and *Sophie's Choice* in William Styron

Robyn Gaier

It seems that at least one reason for the social stigma against suicide is grounded in the unshakeable belief that suicide is a choice. The prevalence of the idea that suicide is a choice is quite understandable. To die by suicide is to die by one's own hand. But what is expected to be happening when persons make choices and, importantly, why believe that persons who die by suicide meet those expectations? In this chapter, I aim to examine both questions primarily through appealing to William Styron's firsthand account of suffering from severe depression (as a mental illness) in his work *Darkness Visible*: *A Memoir of Madness* (1990) and to his well-known novel *Sophie's Choice* (1979). Both descriptions of suicidal thinking serve to illustrate how suicide, while an intentional action, can fail to be a choice.

My aim is twofold. For starters, I will highlight how Styron's experience of suicidal thinking fails to be a "choice" in any meaningful sense of the word. Of course, because it is understandable that suicide ideation among persons suffering from a mental illness is not of their choosing, I will proceed to my second aim. My second aim is to suggest that suicide ideation among persons not obviously suffering from a mental illness might also fail to be a "choice" in any meaningful sense of the word. To be sure, I will begin by briefly considering the nature of choice before turning to insights from Styron's memoir and from his novel *Sophie's Choice* (1979).

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1 To Choose for Oneself

Presumably, one cannot take their own life unless they choose to take it. Much ink has been spilled in the literature about clarifying the difference between suicidal behavior and behavior that is nonsuicidal but self-injurious. The former, it is believed, necessarily involves intent. A person who engages in self-injurious behavior without an intention to die as a result of their behavior is not suicidal even if they die as a result of their behavior. Such deaths are accidental. Yet a person who engages in self-injurious behavior *with an intention to die* as a result of their behavior is another matter. Such deaths are suicides. Therefore, determining whether intentionality is present or absent is essential to determining whether a person died by suicide or by accident. But it is unfortunate that the language of intentionality here implies a false dichotomy—namely, that a person's intention to die must be either present or absent.

Rejecting the false dichotomy presents a different picture and an all-too-often silenced perspective. To imagine, for instance, that a person could have mixed and competing intentions, or simply to imagine the possibility that a person can intentionally engage in behavior that does not reflect their will or desire, complicates defining suicide as an intentional action. In an effort to motivate an understanding of suicide in such a complex web of intentionality, it might be helpful to examine the nature of choice, more specifically.

Prima facie it seems as though one's choices reflect their desires. For instance, I might choose to go on a diet and to exercise regularly because I desire to improve my health and well-being, and I believe that dieting and getting regular exercise will improve my health and well-being. Or, alternatively, I might choose to carpool with a neighbor to a common destination because I desire to save money and to reduce my carbon footprint, and I believe that carpooling with my neighbor will satisfy both desires. In such mundane cases, my choices reflect my desires. I believe that the idea of choices reflecting a person's desires is widely assumed. That is, *even if* it turns out that my diet and exercise program somehow fail to improve my health and well-being, or *even if* it turns out that carpooling does not ultimately save money or reduce my carbon footprint, it is still true that I initially choose to engage in these things because of the desires that I have.

Now I wish to turn attention back to the subject of suicide. Granting that, by definition, dying by suicide is *intentional*, the following argument arises. a) Dying by suicide is a choice that a person makes. b) The choices that a person makes reflect their desires. Therefore, it follows that a person's choice to die by suicide reflects their desire to end their life. The argument seems rather straightforward. Yet such an argument fuels social stigma against persons who suffer from suicide ideation. If suicide is a choice, and if choices reflect a person's desires, then persons who are suicidal have desires that are in opposition to their flourishing. I believe that social stigma perpetuates, in part, because it is difficult to help anyone opposed to their own flourishing, and persons opposed to their flourishing are not in the position to help others or their community at-large. Since most people most of the time desire

their flourishing, attempts to understand and to communicate with persons who do not share this basic desire break down. The failure of connection lends itself to the social stigmatization of suicide and, in general, increases the marginalization of such persons (many of whom are already marginalized in society). Hence, the above argument needs critical evaluation. In short, I believe that one problem with the above argument is that it incorporates the assumption that dying by suicide must be a choice that a person makes merely because it is regarded as an intentional action. Before addressing the first premise, however, I wish to turn attention briefly to the second premise.

For the sake of argument, I wish to grant the second premise. The examples that I noted above help to motivate the idea that, at base, choices reflect a person's desires. But to be clear, the second premise is not without controversy. Suppose, for instance, that a person is driving an automobile along a stretch of road when suddenly a deer appears in the roadway. Swerving to miss hitting the deer will mean going off the road and crashing one's vehicle. But not swerving will mean hitting the deer. A quick choice—to swerve or not to swerve—must be made. While safety protocols and automobile insurance companies advise motorists not to swerve in such situations, it strains credulity to believe that the choice not to swerve aligns with one's desires. At the very least, having no accident at all—and, therefore, no damage to one's automobile, nor heightened risk of personal injury to oneself (not to mention safeguarding the deer in question)—seems to be the desirable outcome. But that preferred outcome is not a reasonable expectation in such a circumstance. So, if a motorist chooses not to swerve, then they are making a choice that does not reflect what they most desire. In such cases then, we might say that they do not choose according to their desires, but rather, they merely choose the lesser of the two evils, or the lesser of the two undesirable outcomes.

So, should the basic idea that choices reflect a person's desires be abandoned? I do not believe so. Perhaps it could be maintained that the choice not to swerve in the above illustration, while not reflecting one's desires per se, still reflect one's desires *in the given situation*. Even so, eventually there would be a point in which the conditions become so constrained that it no longer makes sense to use the word "choice." If, for example, it was literally impossible either to stop one's automobile in time or to swerve safely, then the question "*why did they choose to hit the deer?*" is nonsensical. Asserting that they had no choice, or simply that it was an accident, might be offered in response. So, while I wish to grant the second premise—namely, that a person's choices reflect their desires—I wish to do so with the caveat that, when circumstances are so constrained, legitimate choices cannot be made. The upshot is that an action can be intentional without it reflecting one's desires—just like it is easy to imagine that a motorist who does not swerve to avoid hitting the deer also does not desire to be involved in an accident.

Hence, I believe that the first premise of the above argument—namely, that dying by suicide must be a choice that a person makes if it is an intentional action—is mistaken (see also Chap. 11 in this book). I further believe that attention to the work of William Styron helps to elucidate an understanding of how suicide can be regarded as *intentional* while stopping short of calling it a *choice*. To be sure, I will turn briefly to Styron's memoir and then to his novel *Sophie's Choice* (1979).

2 Insights from *Darkness Visible* (1990)

The idea that an action can be intentional without the action in question reflecting a person's desires may be atypical, but it is not surprising. The idea that intentional actions need not align with a person's desires was clearly articulated by G. E. M. Anscombe, who wrote the following:

> Suppose I feel an upsurge of spite against someone and destroy a message he has received so that he shall miss an appointment. If I describe this by saying 'I wanted to make him miss that appointment,' this does not necessarily mean that I had the thought 'If I do this, he will…' and that it affected me with a desire of bringing that about which led up to my action. This may have happened, but need not. It could be that all that happened was this: I read the message, had the thought 'That unspeakable man!' with feelings of hatred, tore the message up, and laughed. Then if the question 'Why did you do that?' is put by someone who makes it clear that he wants me to mention the mental causes – i.e., what went on in my mind and issued in the action – I should perhaps give this account; but normally the reply would be so such thing. […] One might shrug or say 'I don't know that there was any definite history of the kind you mean' or 'It merely occurred to me….' (1964, p. 33)

There are two points that I wish to flag in the above passage. First, Anscombe noted that the narrator here might have had a desire to cause the man in question to miss his appointment but that such a desire for him to miss the appointment *need not* be present. Hence, it is possible—indeed, perhaps likely—that the action of tearing the piece of paper was an outlet for the anger felt toward the man in question rather than the expression of one's desire that he misses his appointment. It is possible, therefore, that the intentional action of destroying the message did not align with or express a desire of any sort that the man misses his appointment. It is also quite possible that in retrospect the action of destroying the message is regretted and an apology is made (especially if the man in question consequently misses his appointment). But my point here is simply that Anscombe provided an illustration of an intentional action that need not reflect one's desires. If a person's choices reflect their desires, then the above passage illustrates an intentional action that is devoid of choice.

The agent in Anscombe's example above is acting out of hatred, which takes me to the second point that I wish to make—namely, that acting out of hatred is sufficient to explain why the message was destroyed. A further reason or explanation need not be present. The idea that an intentional action can be based upon hatred alone is especially insightful given William Styron's account of what it is like to suffer from severe depression which, for Styron, included an intention to die by suicide. Acknowledging his experience of *self-hatred*, Styron wrote in his memoir:

> Of the many dreadful manifestations of the disease [of depression] […] a sense of self-hatred – or, put less categorically, a failure of self-esteem – is one of the most universally experienced symptoms, and I had suffered more and more from a general feeling of worthlessness as the malady had progressed. (1990, p. 5)

Taking seriously the degree of worthlessness that Styron expressed presents a clearer picture of how a person might intentionally act upon their self-hatred and take actions leading to their death without such actions reflecting a conscious desire to die. To a sufferer of depression, a sense of worthlessness can encapsulate every

thought and action, which is unimaginable to someone not suffering from the disorder. Indeed, Styron explained depression as "a disorder of mood" that "remains nearly incomprehensible to those who have not experienced it" (1990, p. 7). At one point in writing about his suffering during the throes of depression, Styron simply summarized his experience by claiming "I did not think such anguish [was] possible" (1990, p. 63).

In addition to the excessive and relentless feelings of self-hatred and worthlessness, Styron also noted the lack of control that he experienced while in the grip of depression. Such a lack of control is also insightful in the endeavor of understanding how a suicidal person can act intentionally without such actions reflecting their desires. Specifically, Styron described his illness as being accompanied by "confusion, [a] failure of mental focus and [a] lapse of memory" (1990, p. 14). These sinister hallmarks of depression, as Styron referred to them, impeded upon his ability to engage with others and to meet basic obligations. Not being able to think clearly, to plan, or to organize one's priorities reinforces—and cruelly seems to legitimize—the sense of worthlessness already present. A vicious cycle ensues, and one's lack of control is made manifest. To be sure, the extreme lack of control that Styron bore witness to in his account of depression prompted him to suggest that depression "can be as serious a medical affair as diabetes or cancer" (Styron, 1990, p. 9). Styron's claim here is an acknowledgement of the fact that depression can not only be life-threatening, but also that it is neither something acquired nor eradicated by choice.

Styron's insights in his memoir support the idea that while death by suicide can be an intentional action of a sufferer of depression, that does not imply that death by suicide is a choice, whereby a choice reflects a person's desire to die by suicide. To be sure, the idea that a person might have *no choice* in the matter is reflected in the following passage:

> [the pain of depression] is not an immediately identifiable pain, like that of a broken limb. It may be more accurate to say that despair, owing to some evil trick played upon the sick brain by the inhabiting psyche, comes to resemble the diabolical discomfort of being imprisoned in a fiercely overheated room. And because no breeze stirs this caldron, because there is no escape from this smothering confinement, it is entirely natural that the victim begins to think ceaselessly of oblivion. (Styron, 1990, p. 50)

Just as feelings of self-hate can become overwhelming, so too can feelings of desperation. Styron's claim that in such a state of mind, it is "entirely natural […] to think ceaselessly of oblivion" provides a glimpse into the depths and progression of Styron's illness. The lack of control—or, specifically, the lack of choice—is highlighted by Styron's use of the word "victim" to refer to the sufferer of depression. Additionally, Styron here likens his suicidal ideation as akin to needing to escape a room in which he is suffocating. Dying by suicide then becomes no more extraordinary or incomprehensible than taking actions *to survive*. It is entirely natural to try to escape suffocation in whatever circumstance one finds oneself. Further explanation is unnecessary.

Styron's analogy of depression resembling an imprisonment in a fiercely overheated room is noteworthy for another reason, too. It is not simply that the victim

has no choice in the matter. Additionally, the victim is ultimately seeking to escape such intolerable conditions, which is a point often lost in discussions in which suicide is assumed to be a choice. To clarify, recall the argument above, namely that a) dying by suicide is a choice that a person makes and b) the choices that a person makes reflect their desires. Therefore, it follows that a person's choice to die by suicide reflects their desire to end their life. Accepting Styron's analogy calls into question what the conclusion assumes. It is not a desire to end his life that Styron felt but, rather, *a desire to escape the anguish he had not known was possible*. Intending relief from one's pain is different from intending oblivion.

Yet it is too often concluded that suicide, as an intentional action, must also express *a desire to die* rather than simply a need to be relieved from one's antagonizing pain. The sinister hallmarks of depression, such as a lack of focus, a loss of memory, and confusion coupled with a sense of worthlessness may make it seem that one's destruction is the only way possible to receive relief from one's anguish, but that does not mean that by intending to take one's life, self-destruction is desired. Styron's account—and, indeed, his fear of dying by suicide—makes this point clear. He was not *choosing* to die.

A further insight garnered from Styron's account of depression is his insistence upon a sense of being fragmented while in the grip of severe depression. As Styron explained,

> [a] phenomenon that a number of people have noted while in deep depression is the sense of being accompanied by a second self – a wraithlike observer who, not sharing the dementia of his double, is able to watch with dispassionate curiosity as his companion struggles against the oncoming disaster, or decides to embrace it. There is a theatrical quality about all this, and during the next several days, as I went about stolidly preparing for extinction, I couldn't shake off a sense of melodrama – a melodrama in which I, the victim-to-be of self-murder, was both the solitary actor and lone member of the audience. I had not as yet chosen the mode of my departure, but I knew that that step would come next, and soon, as inescapable as nightfall. (1990, pp. 64–65)

The reported fragmentation of Styron's psyche is telling here because such fragmentation implies a loss of a holistic sense of self. Neither the actor nor the lone audience member seems to have control over the play that is unfolding before them. The actor and the lone audience member share a sense of nullity.

Nevertheless, Styron still reported intentional actions. As Styron noted,

> I watched myself in mingled terror and fascination as I began to make the necessary preparation: going to see my lawyer in the nearby town – there rewriting my will – and spending part of a couple of afternoons in a muddled attempt to bestow upon posterity a letter of farewell. (1990, p. 65)

But the actions of rewriting his will and drafting a suicide note were still referred to as actions within a fragmented state. Again, Styron recalled that *he watched himself* in both terror and fascination. The loss of a holistic sense of self provides further reason to abandon the idea that suicide is somehow a choice that reflects one's desires.

Finally, if suicide were a choice, then presumably a suicidal person would be helped by choosing differently or by making a concerted effort simply to choose

otherwise. But Styron's reflection upon his experience of overcoming his suicidal ideation surprisingly had nothing to do with addressing specific thoughts or even the fragmentation of his psyche. Styron noted in his memoir that "for me the real healers were seclusion and time" (1990, p. 69). Writing more generally, Styron claimed that

> [t]hrough the healing process of time – and through medical intervention or hospitalization in many cases – most people survive depression, which may be its only blessing; but to the tragic legion who are compelled to destroy themselves there should be no more reproof attached than to the victims of terminal cancer. (1990, p. 33)

Once again, Styron's account serves as an illustration of how to understand suicide as an intentional action that does not reflect one's desire to die. I will now turn briefly to Styron's famous novel *Sophie's Choice* to motivate the idea that suicide, even in the absence of depression as a mental illness, might also fail to reflect one's desires and, thereby, fail to be a choice.

3 Insights from *Sophie's Choice* (1979)

The heartbreaking choice that is typically thought of in the context of Styron's novel *Sophie's Choice* (1979) is the choice that the character Sophie is forced to make upon her arrival at a Nazi concentration camp during the Second World War. Sophie is sent to the concentration camp with her two children, Jan and Eva. Upon arrival at the camp, Sophie is forced to choose which of her two children is immediately murdered and which child is spared. Not making a choice will mean that both children are sent immediately to their deaths in the gas chambers. Choice, of course, is a misnomer here. Sophie simply cannot make such a choice, as her maternal love makes the *choice* impossible. In the novel, Sophie screams so much pleading not to lose either child that Styron wrote "[t]ormented angels never screeched so loudly above hell's pandemonium" (1979, p. 529). But when the prospect of losing both children comes into clear view, Sophie betrays her maternal love in effort to save one of her children, and her baby girl, Eva, is immediately murdered. Sophie is a victim of horrific evil but suffers the intense burden of guilt by also being an accomplice to such evil. Just as Styron noted that he experienced a fragmentation of his psyche in severe depression, so too, the character of Sophie is broken. Through her loss and betrayal, Sophie loses her sense of self.

Sophie's suicide is foreshadowed in Styron's novel, and so it is of little surprise. Her profound guilt and grief are overwhelming, as we learn that her son, Jan, also did not survive. One might then claim that perhaps Sophie was suffering from severe depression and that like Styron's suicide ideation, Sophie's suicide was a product of her illness. If so, then we would expect to find many similarities between Sophie's suicide ideation and Styron's suicide ideation, and I believe that there are several such similarities. Nevertheless, I believe that it would be unwise to regard Sophie's suicide ideation as on par with something like Styron himself experienced.

While Styron's account of depression captures the torments of an illness, Sophie's depression more closely seems to track her trauma, guilt, and grief. To be clear, Styron did not appeal to his experiences of trauma, guilt, and grief in his account of depression, although that is not to say that such experiences were uninvolved. But, at the very least, Sophie's experiences, as Styron described them, reveals how life events can fragment one's psyche, too. Styron does not need to inform his audience, for instance, that Sophie felt an anguish that she did not know was possible or that she felt as though she were suffocating from the horrors that still imprisoned her thoughts and memories. Yet Sophie's story is told not through Sophie's perspective but, rather, through Stingo, the narrator of the story. Even so, Sophie's suicide is predictable because Styron made it understandable. Like Styron, however, Sophie does not *choose* suicide. Her self-betrayal and loss make her physical death something of a formality.

The relationships among the experience of trauma, depression, and suicide need further attention and exploration elsewhere. Acknowledging simply that suicide ideation might be brought about by various factors is sufficient here. Styron, of course, was aware of discussions regarding the origins of depression, but he mostly avoided commenting on the subject. In his 1988 *New York Times* op-ed piece entitled "Why Primo Levi need not have died," which was published after Primo Levi, a Holocaust survivor, died by suicide, Styron wrote:

> The origins of depression remain a puzzle, despite significant advances in research. Many factors seem to be involved. Aside from the basic chemical disturbance in the brain and behavioral and genetic influences, psychological reasons must be added to the equation. Mr. Levi may have been bedeviled by buried conflicts unrelated to Auschwitz. Or, indeed, his ordeal at Auschwitz may have imposed on his soul an insupportable burden. (2015, p. 191)

Styron left both possibilities open and, in doing so, allowed for various factors to play a role in suicidal thinking—beyond simply mental illnesses. As Styron further explained: "what is of ultimate importance to the victim of depression is not the cause but the treatment and the cure" (2015, p. 191). Yet progress in treatments and cures could be hindered by the perpetuation of the idea that if a person intends their death, then they must also desire to end their life. Styron, fortunately, has debunked such thinking. Both Styron's account of his suicide ideation and the suicide of his character Sophie portray *victims* who are constrained by uncompromising forces. What is importantly shared between Styron's account of depression and the character of Sophie is that they represent different ways of seeing suicide as an intentional, but unchosen, action.

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Chapter 14
Mortality and Meaninglessness: Leo Tolstoy and Mickey Sachs Reconsidered

Morgan Rempel

Filmmaker Woody Allen's interest in nineteenth-century Russian literature is evident in several of his movies, most notably 1975s *Love and Death* (a humorous homage to Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and other classic Russian novels) and 1989s *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (based in part on Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*). Likewise, according to Allen, the basic structure of his *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1987)—the intersecting lives, loves, and families of three sisters—was inspired by Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. But it is *another* work of Tolstoy, the autobiographical *Confession*, that seems to inform that film's most philosophically interesting subplot: the existential crisis of Hannah's suicidal ex-husband Mickey Sachs. Like Tolstoy—who at the height of his career, wealth, and reputation experienced a near-fatal crisis of faith and meaning—Allen's Mickey becomes fixated on thoughts of impermanence, suicide, and God. The narratives of both stories document their protagonists' efforts to resolve their pressing existential predicaments. At first glance, these parallel crises end in very dissimilar ways, with Tolstoy seemingly moving toward and Mickey backing away from religious faith. Indeed, for years I have juxtaposed these works—or more precisely, several scenes from Allen's film and the highly abbreviated version of Tolstoy's *Confession* often found in textbooks and anthologies—in my introductory classes. And while the contrasting of these vivid spiritual journeys has proven effective in the classroom, by examining his *Confession* as a whole and several of its author's subsequent nonfiction works, my chapter argues that the lifesaving "transformations" of Leo Tolstoy and Mickey Sachs turn out to have much in common.

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1 Leo Tolstoy

In 1874, five years after the publication of *War and Peace* and while he was writing *Anna Karenina*, the crisis that had long been brewing within Leo Tolstoy struck with particular force. Evermore intrusive questions concerning the meaning of life made it increasingly difficult for the 47-year-old Tolstoy to see the novel through to completion. Fortunately, for the world of literature, he was able to finish *Anna Karenina* (published in 1878).[1] Fortunate too is the fact that Tolstoy chose to document his very personal crisis and search for meaning in his *next* book, the heart-on-its-sleeve *Confession* (or *A Confession*).[2] Befitting its title, and in this regard not unlike Augustine's *Confessions*, Tolstoy's entry in the genre is remarkably candid and soul-bearing. Phelps (1911, p. 189), for example, suggests that "no author ever told us so much about himself as Tolstoy." Like Augustine, Tolstoy mingles tales of past depravity with intimate details of his pressing spiritual struggle. Also like Augustine is the degree to which its author castigates himself for transgressions both major and minor. Early in his *Confession*, Tolstoy laments:

> I cannot recall those years without horror, loathing, and heartache. I killed people in war, summoned others to duels in order to kill them, gambled at cards; I devoured the fruits of the peasants' labor and punished them; I fornicated and practiced deceit. Lying, thieving, promiscuity of all kinds, drunkenness, violence, murder […] there was not a crime that I did not commit. (1987, p. 22)

Before exploring the narrative of Tolstoy's *Confession*, it is important to emphasize that this work, however candid, is but a snapshot. More specifically, a snapshot of where Tolstoy's existential-religious journey stood in the period 1879 to 1882. While his *Confession*—particularly the excerpts found in textbooks—can convey the impression that the "faith" its author struggles to attain was a long-term answer to his existential-religious questioning, the reality is that Tolstoy would continue to wrestle with these matters for the next 30 years. Accordingly, while my chapter focuses largely on his *Confession*, I also look at some of Tolstoy's later nonfiction writings to help illustrate the larger trajectory of what proved to be a long and difficult struggle.

[1] The final chapters of *Anna Karenina* seem to reflect the crisis its author was experiencing. Chap. 8, for example, finds the suicidal Konstantin Levin speaking of being "horrified, not so much at death as at life without the slightest knowledge of whence it came, wherefore, why and what it was" (Tolstoy, 2000, p. 785). Beard (2014) notes the striking similarity between Levin's suicidal ideation and Tolstoy's own (as depicted in *Confession*).

[2] Written between 1879 and 1882, Tolstoy's *Confession* was first published in 1884.

1.1 Success

Since Woody Allen begins his portrait of Mickey Sachs just prior to the onset of his existential crisis and deals with his past in a series of flashbacks, I will approach Tolstoy's *Confession* the same way. Tolstoy tells us that prior to coming to a "standstill" in 1874 (1987, p. 28), his life was proceeding very nicely indeed.

> I was surrounded on all sides by what is considered complete happiness: I was not yet fifty; I had a kind, loving and beloved wife, lovely children, and a large estate that was growing and expanding with no effort on my part. I was respected by relatives and friends far more than ever before. I was praised by strangers and could consider myself a celebrity without deceiving myself. Moreover, I was not unhealthy in mind or body, but on the contrary enjoyed strength of mind and body such as I had rarely witnessed in my contemporaries. (1987, pp. 30–31)

With respect to Count Tolstoy's wealth, Wilson (1988) notes that by the time he came into his inheritance in 1847, the family fortune was somewhat diminished. "On the other hand, to inherit at the age of nineteen four thousand roubles, three thousand acres and three hundred and thirty slaves was not exactly poverty" (Wilson, 1988, p. 48).

1.2 Crisis

It is into this bucolic situation of "complete happiness" that troubling questions concerning the meaning of life increasingly began to intrude.

> And so I lived until five years ago something very strange started happening to me. At first, I experienced moments of bewilderment; my life would come to a standstill, as if I did not know what to do or how to live; and I felt lost and fell into despair […] these moments of bewilderment started to recur more frequently, always taking the same form. On these occasions, when life came to a standstill, the same questions always arose: 'Why? What comes next?'. (Tolstoy, 1987, p. 28)

Tolstoy's despair at his inability to answer such fundamental questions is soon followed by an increasing fixation on death.

> At first I thought the questions pointless and irrelevant […] However, the questions repeated themselves over and again, demanding answers with more and more urgency. They fell like full stops, always on the same spot, uniting in one large black spot. And then, what happens to everyone stricken with a fatal inner disease happened to me. At first minor signs of indisposition appear, which the sick person ignores […] The suffering increases and before the sick man realizes what is happening he discovers that the thing he had taken for an indisposition is in fact the thing that is more important to him than anything else in the world: it is death. (Tolstoy, 1987, pp. 28–29)

Such melancholy musings are typical of the early chapters of Tolstoy's *Confession.* Certainly, the book's most striking representation of how urgently the matters of human impermanence and mortality presented themselves to the author at this stage of his crisis is Chapter 4's grim image of "stench and worms":

> I could not attribute any rational meaning to a single act, let alone my whole life. I simply felt astonished that I had failed to realize this from the beginning. It had all been common knowledge for such a long time. Today or tomorrow sickness and death will come (and they had already arrived) to those dear to me, and to myself, and nothing will remain other than the stench and the worms. Sooner or later my deeds, whatever they may be, will be forgotten, and I will no longer exist. What is all the fuss about then? (Tolstoy, 1987, p. 31)

1.3 Thoughts of Suicide

Into this ongoing fixation on impermanence, death, and meaninglessness, thoughts of suicide now begin to intrude.

> The thought of suicide now came as naturally as thoughts of improving my life had previously come to me. This idea was so attractive to me that I had to use cunning against myself in order to avoid carrying it out too hastily. I did not want to rush, simply because I wanted to make every effort to unravel the matter. (Tolstoy, 1987, p. 30)

The "cunning" Tolstoy used against himself included removing a rope from his dressing room and no longer trusting himself with a rifle on hunting trips "so as not to be tempted to end my life in such an all too easy fashion" (Tolstoy, 1987, p. 30).

1.4 Search for Meaning

Incapable of writing due to the paralyzing conviction that everything one achieves in life is ultimately forgotten, and increasingly "lured […] towards suicide" (Tolstoy, 1987, p. 33), the middle chapters of *Confession* chart Tolstoy's efforts to extricate himself from this desperate predicament. He tells us that he initially sought answers to his pressing existential concerns from several quarters: wise friends and colleagues, the natural sciences, and various philosophers and religious sages. We learn that the more he consulted his learned friends and associates, the more he realized that they were as lost and incapable of answering such fundamental questions as he was. He points out that in his wealthy, cultured circle, *ennui* and suicide were common.

As one might anticipate, Tolstoy's exploration of the physical sciences in search of answers was no more successful. While it yielded "a countless number of precise answers to things I had not asked: about the chemical constituents of the stars, about the movement of the sun […] about the forms of infinitely tiny atoms" (Tolstoy, 1987, p. 39), the natural sciences furnished none of the answers he hungered for. Tolstoy's assessment of his search for answers in the sciences is especially harsh: "I need to know the meaning of my life, but the fact that it is a particle of infinity not only fails to give it any meaning, but eliminates any possible meaning" (1987, p. 40).

Tolstoy next relates the results of his search for a remedy in the teachings of several sages: Socrates, Schopenhauer, Solomon, and the Buddha. Given his choice

of thinkers, it is not surprising that Tolstoy leaves this phase of his search for meaning as despairing and as attracted to suicide as he was when he went into it. He distills these philosophies to what he takes to be their ultimate judgments on life:

> "The life of the body is an evil and a lie. And since the annihilation of the life of the body is a blessing, we must long for it," says Socrates.
>
> "Life is that which should not be: an evil. The transition into nothingness is the only thing sacred in life," says Schopenhauer.
>
> "Everything in the world, both folly and wisdom, riches and poverty, happiness and grief, all is vanity and emptiness. A man dies and nothing remains. This is absurd," says Solomon.
>
> "It is impossible to live in the consciousness that suffering, weakening, old age and death are inevitable; we must free ourselves from life, from all possibility of life," says Buddha. (1987, p. 44)

While perhaps guilty of oversimplification, Tolstoy is not wrong to extract such dour judgments from these sages. Far from finding remedy among "these powerful minds," he finds support for his melancholy musings. His conclusion? "Happy is he who was never born. Death is better than life; one must free oneself from it" (1987, p. 44).

1.5 Faith?

It is at this point in his existential journey that a despairing Tolstoy introduces a distinction between "rational knowledge, as presented by the learned and wise" and the "irrational knowledge" (1987, p. 50) of faith.[3] Still reluctant to act hastily on his suicidal ideation, an increasingly desperate Tolstoy allows himself to entertain an interesting thought: perhaps "that which I felt to be irrational was not as irrational as I thought" (1987, p. 52). He notes that "however irrational and distorted the answers given by faith might be," faith alone seems capable of answering the ultimate questions of life (1987, p. 53).

> Whichever way I put the question: How am I to live? The answer is always: According to God's law. Or to the question: Is there anything real that will come of my life? The answer is: Eternal torment or eternal bliss. Or, to the question: What meaning is there that is not destroyed by death? The answer is: Unity with the infinite, God, heaven. Thus, in addition to rational knowledge, which I had hitherto thought to be the only knowledge, I was inevitably led to acknowledge that there does exist another kind of knowledge – an irrational one – possessed by humanity as a whole: faith, which affords the possibility of living. Faith remained as irrational to me as before, but I could not fail to recognize that it alone provides mankind with the answers to the questions of life, and consequently with the possibility of life. (Tolstoy, 1987, p. 53)

[3] "And this irrational knowledge is faith, the very thing that I could not help rejecting. This God, one in three, the creation in six days, the devils and angels and all the rest that I could not accept without going mad" (Tolstoy, 1987, p. 50).

In the final chapters of his *Confession*, Tolstoy writes of his earnest efforts to immerse himself in various forms of this "irrational knowledge." He studied Buddhism and Islam, but "above all [he] studied Christianity, both through its writing and through people living around [him]" (Tolstoy, 1987, p. 57).

Of course, Tolstoy was no stranger to Christianity. Early in his *Confession*, we learn that like all children of Russian nobility, he had been baptized and catechized into the Orthodox Church. By the age of 16, however, he had stopped praying, receiving communion, and going to church. By the age of 18, "[he] no longer believed in any of the things [he] had been taught" (Tolstoy, 1987, p. 19). Some 30 years later, the searching Tolstoy tentatively seeks to reconnect with the church of his childhood. He soon becomes convinced, however, that far from bringing him closer to God, the rites he had practiced as a youth and the church into which he had been baptized were in fact detrimental. "I attended services, prayed morning and evening, fasted, received communion" (Tolstoy, 1987, p. 67). But "nearly two thirds of the service, if not all of it, had no meaning or made me feel that in giving it meaning I was lying and thereby destroying my relation to God and losing all possibility of faith" (Tolstoy, 1987, p. 70).[4] While typically omitted from abbreviated versions of his *Confession*, this theme of institutionalized Christianity as an impediment to a relationship with God is one that stays with Tolstoy for the rest of his life.

It is not in an Orthodox cathedral that Tolstoy finds an example of religious faith with which he can be, if not comfortable, less uncomfortable. *Confession*'s final chapters describe and indeed celebrate the faith of "the poor, simple, uneducated folk; pilgrims, monks, sectarians and peasants" (Tolstoy, 1987, p. 58):

> And I started to look more closely at the life and faith of these people, and the further I looked, the more convinced I became that theirs was the true faith, and that their faith was essential to them, and that it alone provides a sense of the meaning and possibility of life.

While those in his wealthy, learned circle feared death and were as perplexed as Tolstoy regarding the ultimate meaning of life, here, among the peasants, he finds neither death anxiety nor existential angst. Clearly sentimentalizing the pious peasants to whom he had long lived a parallel (and parasitic) existence, Tolstoy writes:

> And I came to love these people. The further I penetrated into the lives of those living and dead about whom I had read and heard, the more I loved them and the easier it became for me to live. I lived like this for about two years and a great change took place within me, for which I had been preparing for a long time and the roots of which had always been in me […] It was the activities of the laboring people, those who produce life, that presented itself to me as the only true way. I realized that the meaning provided by this life was truth and I accepted it. (1987, p. 59)

The impression easily conveyed by the excerpts from *Confession* found in textbooks is that the "great change" (Tolstoy, 1987, p. 59) that takes place within the struggling Tolstoy is a religious one. That in the lives and "true faith" (Tolstoy, 1987, p. 58) of the pious peasants, he at last finds the answers that allow him to transcend

[4] On p. 71, Tolstoy offers a moving account of receiving communion for the first time in decades.

his fixation on meaninglessness, death, and suicide. While this impression is not entirely incorrect, we see below that both his inner journey and the newfound beliefs that result from it are far from straightforward.

2 Woody Allen

As noted, Woody Allen has stated that the principal storyline of his Academy Award winning 1986 film *Hannah and Her Sisters* derives partly from Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (Meade, 2000). Like that masterpiece, Allen's film revolves around the lives of three sisters: in this case, Hannah, Holly, and Lee. While I know of no such comment on the part of Allen vis a vis the film's indebtedness to Tolstoy's *Confession*, there is no doubt that that text informs the film's subplot involving Hannah's ex-husband Mickey Sachs. I say this both because the existential journey of Mickey closely follows the blueprint established by Tolstoy's *Confession* a century earlier and because Allen employs a memorable quote from *Confession* to introduce a key scene in the film.

2.1 Success

Mickey Sachs is a successful fiftyish television writer and producer. While his level of success is not on par with Count Tolstoy, Mickey is nonetheless doing quite well for himself. His long-standing career in television is busy and successful; he lives in a large two-story residence in Manhattan; he has lasting friendships and a good relationship with his ex-wife, Hannah.

2.2 Crisis

Early in the Mickey storyline, symptoms of hearing loss result in an increasingly worrisome series of medical tests. While the results of the tests ultimately prove negative, along the way, a frightened Mickey comes to convince himself that he has a fatal brain tumor. When he at last gets the all-clear regarding his brain-scan results, Mickey is elated. He runs out of the hospital and literally dances down the street. Abruptly, he stops in his tracks. In the next scene, Mickey tells a co-worker that he is quitting his job.

> Gail: What do you mean you're quitting? Why? The news is good...
> Mickey: Do you realize what a thread we're all hanging by? […] Can you understand how meaningless everything is? Everything! I'm talking about our lives, the show […] the whole world, it's meaningless.
> Gail: Yeah […] but you're not dying!

Mickey: No, I'm not dying now, but […] when I ran out of the hospital, I was so thrilled because they told me I was going to be all right. And I'm running down the street, and suddenly I stop, because it hit me […] I'm not going to go today. I'm okay. I'm not going to go tomorrow. But eventually, I'm going to be in that position.
Gail: You're just realizing this now?
Mickey: Well, I don't realize it now, I know it all the time, but I managed to stick it in the back of my mind […] because it's a very horrible thing to think about. (Allen, 1987, pp. 95–96)

2.3 Thoughts of Suicide

The conversation continues:

Mickey: Can I tell you a secret? A week ago, I bought a rifle […] if they told me that I had a tumor, I was going to kill myself...
Gail: Well, you know, eventually it is going to happen to all of us.
Mickey: Yes, but doesn't that ruin everything for you? […] It just takes the pleasure out of everything. I mean, you're gonna die, I'm gonna die, the audience is gonna die, the network's gonna -- The sponsor. Everything! […] I can't stay on this show. I gotta get some answers. Otherwise, I'm telling you, I'm going to do something drastic. (Allen, 1987, pp. 96–98)

Clearly, Mickey's brush with mortality brings with it a Tolstoyesque succession of troubling thoughts. Like Tolstoy, and at roughly the same stage of life, Mickey concludes that the inevitability of death and the fundamental impermanence of life's joys and achievements, "takes the pleasure out of everything" and renders life "meaningless." With the growing awareness of this predicament comes increasing thoughts of suicide. Sadly, as we have seen, Mickey is not alone in such reasoning.

2.4 Search for Meaning

The next scene involving Mickey is introduced by a title card reading: "The only absolute knowledge attainable by man is that life is meaningless [Tolstoy]" (Allen, 1987, p. 108). The original context for this quote from *Confession* is Tolstoy's deep disappointment following his fruitless search for answers among philosophers and sages. "Not only had they found nothing," says Tolstoy, "but they plainly acknowledged the same thing that had led me to despair: The only absolute knowledge attainable by man is that life is meaningless" (1987, p. 34).

In *Hannah and Her Sisters*, after the Tolstoy quotation fades from the screen, we see a thoughtful looking Mickey walking past a copy of Rodin's *The Thinker*—a work routinely associated with philosophy—on a university campus. He lampoons the supposed wisdom of Socrates, Nietzsche, and Freud, observing: "Millions of books written on every conceivable subject by all these great minds, and, in the end, none of them knows anything more about the big questions of life than I do" (Allen, 1987, p. 109). While Mickey's meaning-of-life booklist is not the same as Tolstoy's, the depressing outcome of his reading is.

2.5 Faith?

The theme of life's fundamental meaninglessness also informs Mickey's next appearance. He is sitting in the office of a priest, who asks: "Why do you think that you would like to convert to Catholicism?"

> Mickey: Well, because I gotta have something to believe in, otherwise life is just meaningless.
> Priest: So, at the moment you don't believe in God?
> Mickey: No. And I want to […] if I can't believe in God then I don't think life is worth living. (Allen, 1987, p. 129)

At the close of their conversation, the priest hands a worried looking Mickey a stack of books. Some months pass. In a scene reminiscent of Tolstoy's survey of eastern religions, Mickey has a brief conversation about death with a Hare Krishna devotee.

> Krishna devotee: What's your religion?
> Mickey: Well, I was born Jewish, you know, but last winter I tried to become a Catholic and […] it didn't work for me. I studied and I tried, and I gave it everything, but, you know, Catholicism for me was die now, pay later. And I just couldn't get with it.
> Krishna devotee: You're afraid of dying?
> Mickey: Well […] yeah, naturally. Aren't you? (Allen, 1987, pp. 144–145)

2.6 Answers?

It is at this point that the Mickey Sachs' storyline of *Hannah and Her Sisters* takes what seems to be a very un-*Confession* like turn. Mickey runs into Hannah's sister Holly. They go to lunch, during which Mickey recounts further details of his existential crisis.

> One day about a month ago […] I really hit bottom. You know, I just felt that in a Godless universe, I didn't want to go on living. Now I happen to own this rifle […] which I loaded, believe it or not, and pressed it to my forehead. And I remember thinking, at the time, I'm going to kill myself. (Allen, 1987, p. 169)

Mickey further shares that because of anxiety and perspiration, the gun inadvertently fired. He wasn't hurt, but the near-fatal incident only adds to his distress. He leaves his apartment and eventually seeks respite in a movie theater. The scenes on the screen—from the Marx Brothers' classic *Duck Soup* (1933)—are, not surprisingly, humorous, and light-hearted. Reports Mickey:

> The movie was a film that I'd seen many times in my life since I was a kid, and I always loved it […] And I started to feel how can you even think of killing yourself? I mean, isn't it so stupid? I mean, look at all the people up there on the screen. You know, they're real funny, and what if the worst is true? What if there is no God, and you only go around once and that's it? Well, you know, don't you want to be part of the experience? You know, what the hell, it's not all a drag. And I'm thinking to myself, geez, I should stop ruining my life searching for answers I'm never gonna get, and just enjoy it while it lasts […] And then, I started to sit back, and I actually began to enjoy myself. (Allen, 1987, p. 172)

While movies and movie theaters figure prominently in several of Allen's films,[5] this particular scene speaks to the potentially transformative power of cinema. Reminded afresh of simpler pleasures and the human capacity for joy, Mickey Sachs leaves the movie house literally a changed man.

Not coincidently, Mickey's life-saving insight—that "I should stop ruining my life searching for answers I'm never gonna get, and just enjoy it"—finds expression a century earlier in Tolstoy's *Confession.* Midway through that volume he too pauses to consider the therapeutic change of course eventually taken by Mickey. But while Tolstoy recognizes the possibility that the questions he is torturing himself with are ultimately unanswerable, he convinces himself that returning to a *less* examined life is simply not an option. "No matter how many times I am told: you cannot understand the meaning of life, do not think about it but live, I cannot do so because I have already done it for too long" (Tolstoy, 1987, p. 32).

Central to Mickey's movie theater epiphany, conversely, is that it is *not* too late to call off his search for ultimate meaning. Unable to find solace in religion or philosophy, and in the wake of his almost-suicide, Mickey manages to do what Tolstoy convinces himself cannot be done: he *suspends* his search for a meaning that transcends death and opts instead to sit back and enjoy his life. At the close of *Hannah and Her Sisters*, set a little more than a year after his movie theater transformation, Allen offers a brief update concerning the postcrisis Mickey Sachs. In the film's final scene, we see—for the first time—a smiling Mickey. We learn that he is now happily married to Holly and that they are expecting a baby. Mickey's reimmersion into life seems complete.

3 Tolstoy Reconsidered

Clearly, the different resolutions of the parallel stories of *Hannah and Her Sisters* and *Confession* make for an effective contrast. Leo Tolstoy resolves his existential crisis and finds meaning—an ultimate meaning capable of answering his burning questions concerning death and impermanence—in religious faith. Mickey Sachs, on the other hand—after an unsuccessful, Tolstoyesque search for answers—puts aside his search for ultimate meaning and finds happiness in more mundane pursuits. One must be careful, however, especially when dealing with the abbreviated versions of *Confession* commonly found in textbooks, not to embrace an overly simplified understanding of Tolstoy's "transformation."

Unless Allen opts to make a sequel, we will never know the long-term status of Mickey Sachs' existential journey. The particulars of the rest of Tolstoy's life, however, are well known. Since he lived and wrote for 30 years following the crisis

[5] See, for example, 1972's *Play It Again, Sam*, *Annie Hall* (published in 1977), *Stardust Memories* (published 1980), *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (published in 1985), and *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (published in 1989).

documented in his *Confession*, a thorough analysis of Tolstoy's post-*Confession* career is beyond the scope of this chapter. A brief look at several themes from this phase of his life, however, is in order.

3.1 Faith?

Despite the impression left by truncated versions of *Confession* that, following his initial resistance, Tolstoy ultimately comes to embrace the "true faith" (1987, p. 58) of the peasants and learns to live with the extrarational aspects of religion; it is well to note that his post-*Confession* writings continue to be characterized by a marked aversion to the mystical and supernatural. Revealingly, in 1855, 29 years before the publication of his *Confession*, the young Tolstoy diarized: "A conversation about divinity has suggested to me a great, a stupendous idea […] the founding of a new religion […] the religion of Christianity but purged of dogmatism and mysticism; a practical religion not promising future bliss, but giving bliss on earth" (Lavrin, 1946, p. 93). The "conversion" of the 1870s notwithstanding, Tolstoy would continue to explore the possibility of a "purged" Christianity for the rest of his life. Even in the autobiographical snapshot that is *Confession*, Tolstoy relates that he simply tried "not to think about" the more mystical aspects of Orthodox Christianity (1987, p. 70).

In his *Critique of Dogmatic Theology* (1904, published in 1884, two years after his *Confession* was completed), Tolstoy goes considerably further. Not only is he critical of specific rites and beliefs of the Orthodox Church, but he flatly rejects any number of foundational, supernatural Christian doctrines: the Incarnation, and Jesus' miracles, resurrection, and ascension into heaven (to name only a few). In work after work, from 1880, through his excommunication by the Russian Orthodox Church in 1901, until his death in 1910, Tolstoy would continue to explore and extend his longstanding vision of a *practical* Christianity, purged of the mystical and otherworldly. Like Mickey Sachs' discomfort with the extrarational beliefs of Catholicism, there is much about religious faith that even the post-"transformation" Tolstoy simply can't "get with" (Allen, 1987, p. 144).

Tellingly, given the central role played by the fear of death and impermanence in his existential crisis, the ideas of resurrection and personal immortality ultimately offer Tolstoy little succor. By the 1890s, his longstanding exploration of a nonmystical Christianity seems to have "purged" such (potentially comforting) ideas altogether. On Christmas Day, 1894, for example, Tolstoy diarized: "One may wish to, and believe one can, fly away to Heaven, or be resurrected after death, but it won't occur to anyone to wish for or believe that 2 + 2 will make 5" (Christian, 1985, p. 343). Two years later, he would write: "Belief in personal immortality always seems to me a misunderstanding" (Lavrin, 1946, p. 98). Perhaps because of his abiding suspicion toward such mystical "misunderstandings," Tolstoy continued to wrestle with mortality and impermanence long after the "transformation" described in *Confession*.

An obvious work in this regard is *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (2014, published in 1886), an unflinching examination of illness, dying, regret, and meaning. Not coincidentally, Tolstoy began this morose novella in 1882, shortly after completing his *Confession.* Beard, for example, characterizes *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* "as a fictional exploration of the theoretical problems of religion, morality, and mortality explored autobiographically in *Confession*" (2014, p. 21). She also emphasizes "that when Tolstoy wrote *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* and *Confession*, preoccupied with dying as both those works are, he was still only in his fifties; he was to live another twenty-five years" (2014, p. 13).

During these years, Tolstoy continued to keep a diary revealing his ongoing struggle with thoughts of God, sin, and the desirability of death. Rancour-Laferriere gathers several diary entries "chosen at random from a broad span of years, from 1884 [when *Confession* was published] to 1910 [the year of his death]" (2007, p. 43). Writes Tolstoy: "Everything that I do is bad, and I suffer terribly from this badness"; "I am very bad"; "I am sinful, I feel like dying"; "I'm in a bad way – egoism, lust, fame – I am filled with all this filth. Help me, father"; "I desire death – not passionately, but peacefully. And I know that this is bad" (Rancour-Laferriere, 2007, p. 43). Certainly, years after his near-fatal confrontation with life's impermanence, Tolstoy had by no means transcended his fixation on God, death, and dying.

Accordingly, while there is much about organized religion that he comes to reject, unlike Mickey Sachs, Tolstoy *never* pauses his search for God and ultimate meaning. Wilson, for example, notes that among Tolstoy's final words from his deathbed were: "Search, always go on searching" (1988, p. 513). Gessen, meanwhile, characterizes Tolstoy as one "not having found, but always searching for God" (Rancour-Laferriere, 2007, p. 7). And while the *results* of his decades of searching are far from systematic,[6] several themes recur in Tolstoy's later religious writings: a) Jesus was first and foremost a moral teacher and social reformer; b) the essence of Jesus' social message is contained in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:21–48), and c) Jesus' "kingdom" is not an other-worldly destination accessed via rituals and clergy, but a *this*-worldly state of affairs, realizable by following his example and commandments.[7] Said Tolstoy's friend Aylmer Maude: "He was sure that it is man's business to establish the Kingdom of God on earth. He was convinced, too, that by conforming to the laws of God, miserable lives can be made happy" (Phelps, 1911, p. 100).

[6] Rancour-Laferriere insists that Tolstoy's "discourse on God is not a true, coherent theology, but quasi-theology at best" (2007, p. 35).

[7] "He resolved to practice the five great commandments given by Christ in His Sermon on the Mount. Henceforth, like Levin at the end of *Anna Karenina*, he would live by this simple creed, and he would achieve salvation, that is, not by some mystical or supernatural benefit bestowed upon him by the Church, but the inner certainty that he was leading a life as it was meant by God to be led" (Wilson, 1988, pp. 310–311).

Consequently, in one late-period work after another,[8] Tolstoy tirelessly advocates a life of love, peace, charity, and nonviolence. He becomes a strident critic of social injustice and war. He exchanges a series of letters with Mahatma Gandhi. He is nominated three times for the Nobel Peace Prize. He renounces his aristocratic title ("Count") and gives away great portions of his wealth. He establishes schools for the illiterate and more than a hundred soup kitchens for the poor (for whom he becomes a vocal advocate). He devotes the bulk of his literary energies to edifying short stories and essays on religion and pacifism. So, while certainly inspired by the social teachings of Jesus, it remains an open question whether the "great change" (Tolstoy, 1987, p. 59) undergone by Tolstoy in the wake of his crisis is best characterized as a religious re-birth, a moral conversion, or something else altogether. What is clear, however, is that his postcrisis commitments turn out to be every bit as immediate and *this*-worldly as Mickey Sachs'.

I trust that this chapter, by looking beyond the abridged version of *Confession* found in textbooks and situating the "transformation" chronicled in that volume against the background of its author's larger, decades-long existential-religious journey, has demonstrated at least two things. First, that the relationship between the respective inner journeys of Mickey Sachs and Leo Tolstoy is more complex than a cursory look at *Hannah and Her Sisters* and *Confession* might suggest. And second, as Mickey concludes during his movie theater epiphany, that *certainty* regarding the weighty matters considered in both stories—mortality, meaninglessness, suicide, God, etc.—is hard to come by. On a personal note, I still contrast these two stories with my philosophy students. But since examining Tolstoy's long-term inner journey in more detail, the classroom discussion of these vivid texts is considerably richer.

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[8] See, for example, *What I Believe* (published in 1884), *What Is to Be Done?* (published in 1886), *On Life* (published in 1887), *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* (published in 1894), *The Gospel in Brief* (published in 1896), *What Is Religion?* (published in 1902).

Chapter 15
Carlo Michelstaedter and the Philosophical Suicide

Juan Ignacio Iturraspe Staps

What evidence do we have prior to the suicide? Each case is unique, but each trace left can give us clues about the prelude to the acting out. That is why in the following chapter, I will explore the writings of the young Carlo Michelstaedter who at the age of 23 decided to put an end to his existence. In his texts, we not only find contradictions with respect to his last decision but also the germ of a morality that obscenely blocked his future. Following in the wake of the one who maintains the equivalence between theory and practice, Michelstaedter, after delivering his *tesi di laurea*, continued to its last consequences an impossible and incredibly heavy journey, defending a position that, while being critical, absorbed all his efforts to carry it out. To approach the writings of the young Italian, we will do so in the light of psychoanalytic concepts from different Freudian schools, the ideal of the self and the ideal self being paramount, with which we will explore what is considered a philosophical suicide by the prevention, intervention, and post-prevention field of suicidal behavior. In addition, we will make a general overview of what is considered by these fields of clinical study the indications that denote said behavioral vectors and how it has its development in the world of philosophy, this being our case, in which a theory unfolds in a demanding practice that makes the present a constant desynchrony and discomfort precisely because of the insidious notion of being contained invisible in an ought to be.

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1 Introduction

The figure of Carlo Michelstaedter is paradoxical. If we delve into his works, what we can find are characters and conceptual developments opposed to the idea of suicide, and even coming to consider it as a sign of lack of spirit or will.

So, why talk about someone like that in such a book that deal precisely with the idea of suicide? Precisely because Carlo Michelstaedter, on October 17, 1910, after handing in his graduate thesis entitled *Persuasion and Rhetoric* (2004), grabbed a revolver and in the attic that his friend Nino had lent him, so he could compose it, he pulled the trigger over his head ending his life.

For those who have read the last work of Carlo Michelstaedter, the one already mentioned, they do not do it without a magnifying glass, without a deep analysis of his words, since it is the text with which he says goodbye to life. Reading him, as I will review below, allows us to see certain signs of what we could call philosophical suicide.

But before starting, I will make a brief biographical note of this Italian philosopher to, later, dedicate to the analysis of his works and correspondence accompanied by the extensive studies of Mimmo Cangiano in his book *The Wreckage of Philosophy* of 2019 whose deep reading has allowed me to explore various avenues of investigation into Michelstaedter's suicide.

2 Biographical Notes

Carlo Raimondo Michelstaedter was born in Gorizia in 1878 into a Jewish family. His parents, Abraham Alberto Michelstaedter and Emma Ester Lea Luzzato, offered Carlo a family environment where intellectuality and free thought were the order of the day without neglecting religious practices and social life. The influences of his parents led him to focus his thought on political issues concerning public life (mainly his father), Jewish theology (due to his maternal heritage), and the study of the sacred and ancient scriptures, which later were reflected in his writings and academic decisions, refer to the practical philosophy and ethics found in the wisdom of Ancient Greece. After abandoning his studies in mathematics at the University of Vienna in 1905, he opted for the study of philosophy at the University of Florence, where he had contact with thinkers such as Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Ibsen. It will be in that same university where he will deliver his *tesi di laurea* and end his life.

According to the various bibliographic sources that I have consulted, he is presented as a charming young man who seeks to please with his presence. He has great communication skills and takes great concern in the maintenance and care of others, both close and unknown. It is not surprising that he is nicknamed "the divine young man," since his charm and good manners were the perfect example of a dandy rather than a bohemian. As we will see later, this behavior has a philosophical root since, like Siddhārtha Gautama or Jesus Christ, his disposition before the rest

must be exemplary, that is, be the representation of good action, good speech, etc. Be ethically irreproachable.

Leaving this line for later, Carlo Michelstaedter had contact with different thinkers of his time such as Ernst Moch, Friedrich Nietzsche, Henry Bergson, William James, among others, although it was his pessimistic affinity with tragic thinking that brought him closer to Henrik Ibsen.

After his death, what he left us were drawings, poems, and a series of philosophical writings in an unfinished essay style. In fact, it only consists of two publications: one for his own account and one for his mother. Even so, it will not be until April 30, 1958, that all his writings will be published in a work entitled *Opere* compiled by Gaetano Chiavacci and published by Sansoni and Firenze publishers with about 1,000 pages. All we find there are his writings from the *Tagebuch*, his correspondence, critical sections with notes on his books, and unfinished articles, among others.

Even with everything already investigated, the reasons why his suicide took place are still unknown. It is true that his brother, Gino Jehuda Eliah Michelstaedter, also committed suicide after going into exile in the USA, New York specifically, just a year before Carlo, which may give us some clue. In the same way that his sisters, Elda and Paula, had difficulties to survive in the hostile environment in which the territory of the Austro-Hungarian Empire was at the beginning of the twentieth century. Carlo's determined conviction in his last stage of political thought was reluctant, reactive, in the face of his contemporaneity of which he only saw nihilism, emptiness, and falsehood, he resorted, from boredom, to forms with which to resist the advance more and more notorious for an infected bourgeois character that freezes and annihilates all kinds of ties with others, oneself, the world, and things.

He tried to elaborate his thoughts freely. He always seemed to go his own way, and although he was part of the humanities' student body at the University of Florence in 1905, after leaving the mathematics degree at the University of Vienna, he did not stop investigating on his own, experimenting and producing texts and drawings with those who represent his tribulations and philosophical lucubration.[1]

3 The Ideal Ego and the Ego Ideal in the Ultimate Theory of Carlo Michelstaedter

I will analyze the work of Carlo Michelstaedter under the often counterintuitive and dark light of psychoanalysis. In particular, I would like to focus on two concepts that work with what I consider to be the possible structural root of the problem that

[1] To expand this brief introduction on the figure of the philosopher, I recommend my presentation for *Curso sobre pesimismo filosófico* (*Course on philosophical pesimism*) at the Autonomous University of Madrid, Spain (Iturraspe Staps, 2021), together with the editorial team of *Revista Hénadas*, or visiting the magazine's website which contains the topics explained therein in the second volume (Iturraspe Staps, 2022a). Also, there is an article published at my magazine called *Exosui* where I develop deeper on the psyche of Carlo through the lens of Lacan and Winnicott (Iturraspe Staps, 2022b).

results in suicide, in its multiple variations and unique interpretations. Both concepts are those of the Ideal Ego (*Idealich*) and the Ego Ideal (*Ichideal*). Once his multiple functions and relationships with unconscious processes have been presented, we will see the particular case of the Italian philosopher, and we will explore why Lacan, in his years of teaching, had opted for an anti-philosophical position. The same position which Alain Badiou (2015, 2018, 2019) took in his seminars, in addition to the French psychoanalyst, the figures of Wittgenstein and Nietzsche.

What do the concepts of the Ideal Ego and the Ego Ideal refer to? Following the second Freudian topic, the one that differs from the coordinates of unconscious, preconscious, and conscious by those of id, ego, and superego, we understand that the ideal factor, the idealization process, is closely linked to narcissism. But let's go by parts.

First, the Ideal Ego, as described by Laplanche and Pontalis in their *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (1988), would be understood as a heroic identification. This process, as I mentioned before, is linked to infantile narcissism, a topology from which the omnipotence of the first stages of growth is derived. The Ideal Ego would find in the divine figure the possibility of an impossible: *to recover the omnipotence snatched from him*. It is not surprising that we see this trope of reconquest everywhere in advertising, for example, since they offer us the possibility of the impossible: *return to the real, this mythical and impossible outside*. That is why the Ideal Ego is linked to the imaginary register, to primary narcissism, primary identifications, that is, the first encounters with the Other[2] and the imaginary configuration of oneself, its agglutination and specular composition.

But what would it mean to return to that place, to that kind of Eden? The Real is something that goes through every situation; it is traumatic and forces us to reconfigure the symbolic order through which everyday life flows, such as the introduction of new technology, a tragic and miserable event, the aggressive oppression of structural and marginalist violence of the economy and social hierarchies, the indiscriminate abuse, etc. They would be events that we could consider as potential cracks in the symbolic order. The Ideal Ego, in this sense, would be a call back to the id where the narcissistic ideal is found.

This uncritical subjection to the Ideal Ego, the inability of the subject to detach himself through doubt, introspective reflection, leads to being trapped in what we could say, following Lacan, the desire of the Other. Deleuze (2021) already pointed out, speaking of the film director Vicente Minelli and the act of creation, that being trapped in the dream of the Other means being subject to a devouring, annihilating,

[2] The difference between the other and the Other is a distinction that is made in Lacanian psychoanalysis that distinguishes the other as a partner, people, similar, etc., while the Other is that imaginary and symbolic field through which one develops their identity in society. The Other is that which from birth we are entering and configuring ourselves as we find it in others, with lowercase. The Other, as Lacan will say, exists only as an articulation of knowledge through signifiers. Neurosis occurs precisely when the Other becomes patent, "exists," precisely because of the encrustation of knowledge.

sadistic fantasy, an inhuman power that can come from the most threatening and military fascist group as the timid dream of a young man or girl (Tiqqun, 2001).

What doubt allows is to open a breach in this Ideal Ego and decongest the drive (*Trieb*) path that this investiture causes to the Ego that finds itself in a position of a victim, so to speak. A very poor place, despicable, and even guilty.

The tribute paid by the force of this return to an omnipotent narcissism is that of the bond with the other, leaving only space for the Other. There is no room for doubt where one only believes in the objectivity of the unquestionable *being* that is (having) himself. A supposed neutrality and coldness permeate the social bond. Or, in the words of Michelstaedter, a pusillanimous rhetoric.

The curious thing about Carlo's case is that, opposed to this disastrous future of society, he puts another figure before him: *the persuaded*.

If, on the one hand, the perversion of the rhetorician produces symptoms in the Italian philosopher, he answers with the other side of the same coin: *the persuaded*. This last figure, who must set an example with his impeccable behavior, with his exalted wisdom, following what was said about the Ideal Ego, would be nothing more than another way of returning to a certain omnipotence: *total control and existential adaptation to an idealistic reality.*

As I mentioned at the beginning of this writing, Carlo Michelstaedter felt identified with the figures of his time such as Henrik Ibsen or Otto Weininger, who responded to the advance of positivism and the industrialization of the nineteenth century with the so-called *tragic thought* whose beginnings we can locate in Arthur Schopenhauer. Faced with this growing nihilism in society and the atheistic technological theology conquering the cities and depopulating the countryside, the Italian philosopher, given his fascination with the Ancient Greek world, could only put himself before the world with a rabid and proactive critique of the present whose line of flight[3] is found in the figure of the persuaded.

The weight of this figure is remarkable since he not only carries the mandate of what *should be* but also that of what *not should be*. This leads us to think that the Ideal Ego is the unconscious disposition to a model that disturbs, perverts, what happens by placing it within the limits of the unlimited ideal. In other words, affective and object relations go through the grinder of an objectively desirable result. A series of coordinates that pave and put rails to the act to reach a position of omnipotence.

This is what I consider by Ideal Ego. On the other hand, we have the Ego Ideal, whose difference happens to be the object of the ego. Following again the description offered by Laplanche and Pontalis (1988) on this concept, they will present it to us as the point of convergence between the already mentioned narcissism (where the processes of idealization of the ego take place) and the identifications with various figures (parents, paternal substitutes, collective ideals and socially accepted, institutionalized canons, etc.). The fact that they can be disseminated by the social

[3] See also Chap. 9 in this book by Alison Parks, where she develops this notion of "lines of flight," which I use from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987).

texture allows us to identify the Ego Ideal within the symbolic register, in the secondary elaborations, where both the primary narcissism is resolved with a decline in the Oedipus complex, and the anguish and bellicosity of said embryonic state, that is, the subject uses these ideals to appease, lead, support, and direct the aggressiveness and violence of primary formations.

This ideal, aspirational, calls the subject to rank the objects that he has around him, both things and people, according to the greater or lesser adequacy that it allows. As in Indiana Jones-style adventure movies, while the bad guy seeks absolute power through an arcane and magical object, the hero prefers to keep it or leave it in the hands of a public institution. The curious thing about these cases is not that the bad guy wants to reestablish or correct some past trauma as usually happens (which also happens), but in that escalation of power, the unconscious is already satisfied and not so much in recovering a lost love or a dead relative, etc.

They also indicate, as we saw a moment ago, that the Ego Ideal is intimately linked to the superego, which is why the narcissistic subject fascinated by this omnipotent figure always finds himself competing against himself through insidious comparisons. The current self and the ideal will be in an internal brawl in which the ego instance is absent since the one who speaks is the desire of the Other, of the ideal, composed of an infinity of mandates, coordinates by which to regulate existence. A joke here is seen as offensive. The ridicule that would open the possibility in the impossible of the dream of the Other is taken as a substantial threat, an ontological danger (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1988).

But, why a threat or a danger? Because it attempts against the dialectic that is sustained in the idealization. This dialectic we are talking about is that of omnipotence and impotence in front of power, leaving potency for another realm, that of desire. This dialectic includes the ideal image, which would function as a photograph that consistently condenses everything there is (there is nothing outside the image), and the Ideal Ego would function here as a source of ignorance.

What do we mean by "source of ignorance"? This Ideal Ego says "I am" and at that moment closes the limits of knowledge. It is not a humble position. In fact, it can be completed with "I am a failure," and it would still be arrogant since it maintains the dialectic with omnipotence. The distinction we made between the actual self and the ideal one is suspended in favor of the latter. The Ideal Ego is hypnotized by a timelessness. If it can do everything, it will be powerful at all times.

But this fantasy, as Freud would say (1976), anal or sadistic-anal, which consists of the retentive, conservative capacity, marginalizes potency. And, what is potency? That which escapes the photograph that says everything, what is beyond the margins. In short, what appears. The potency happens suddenly. It has its own autonomy that escapes the domain of the One, the panopticon, the concentration of knowledge, monopoly, etc.

In the case of Michelstaedter, we see that he elaborates an extended explanation, a philosophical description, and a series of logical arguments, to capture his present and propose a better future. It is in this word, "better," that all the superego weight of the ideal is concentrated. Carlo himself realizes that it is not easy to get rid of the rhetorician in society. In fact, he recognizes a certain dialectic between this figure

and the persuaded. But a careful reading reveals that the persuaded is located as a teleology, as an ideal, while the rhetorician would become the entrenched figure of the victim, of the one who prefers not to know (remember that the Ideal Ego was the source of ignorance) but to sustain this status with the knowledge of the time such as scientific, technological, economic, etc., which assures him this position of ignorance and fictitiously objective and neutral knowledge.

Continuing with the description of the Ego Ideal, we see that Laplanche and Pontalis (1988) make a distinction that can help us here to disambiguate what we mean by ideal and superego.

Starting with the latter, by superego we understand, as Freud points out in *The Ego and the Id* (1976), that authoritarian instance, an omnipotent figure, intimately linked to the drive and anarchic plane that would be the Id. In this way, the superego would suppose the critical, punitive, and authoritative instance that will command the ego against the impulses that inhabit in him in favor of a suitable character, coherent, and cohesive with the values found in culture through mediated access by family, companions, lovers, partners, enemies, friends, etc.

On the other hand, and here, Laplanche and Pontalis illustrates us with the distinction, the Ego Ideal is "the way in which the subject must behave to respond to what the authority expects" (1988, p. 144). In other words, we have on one side the photograph that concentrates everything possible and marginalizes the impossible and, on the other, the correct way of accessing this omnipotent knowledge similar to the control of a panopticon. We thus have a complex composed of totemic figures and taboos. Feared and loved characters. Internalized and eccentric figures. Ideal and prohibition (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1988).

The lucubration of the Italian philosopher, paying attention to his last writing, *Persuasion and Rhetoric* (2004), lead us to consider that philosophical suicide is not carried out due to a physical ailment or some rational incapacitation, but rather, by the same force of imagination, from the agglutination and fixation of the descriptive idea of social reality and the very role of the philosopher. Any surprise, amazement, bewilderment, etc., is objectified and blinded, engulfing it within the usual circuit of ideal coordinates. A strong coding.

The surprise, the amazement at the flow of life, the verification of a repetition of a particular behavior, the openness to discovery of new knowledge, the abandonment of the omnipotence-impotence dialectic, and the access to the realm of potency instead of power, taking distance from melancholy and its compulsion to self-punishment, self-reproach, for the lost object guarded by the superego, etc. There is a plane of existence that is displaced in the face of coherent and adequate lucubration with the image and discourse of the Other. This respect and care for the ideal supposes the rejection, in most cases aggressive, of others, that is, everything that resists the obsessive compulsion to minutely control every event.

Contrary to what Carlo Michelstaedter proposes, in order to get out of the existential misery in which the rhetorician lives, there must not necessarily be an overproduction of the persuaded (an omnipotence-impotence dialectic), but, on the contrary, distort these coordinates through an elaborative work that brings the

analytical course turning points of the force of knowledge through the incidence of castration and, more importantly, open the possibility of the castration of the Other.

What do we mean by the latter? As mentioned by Laplanche and Pontalis (1988), the castration complex allows responding to the anatomical difference that the child perceives regarding the absence and presence of the penis. The answer can go in two directions, either anguish or anxiety. Fear of castration or lack of compensation. In regards to this, and establishing a translation that is understandable, we would be talking about the know-how and its ignorance in the face of the incomprehensible, which resists all explanation. In this direction, we could understand why Lacan abandoned considering what the origin of language would have been, focusing on what he is currently doing. In other words, what matters is not the content of the dream, but how it is elaborated.

Castration is the demarcation of a limit, putting a hand brake on the unlimited lucubration of what is missing (in the case of girls) or is there (boys). Structurally, when we speak of the castration complex, we refer to the devirtualization of authority figures and the truncation of the modes of response to this figure. The Ideal Ego and the Ego Ideal do not constitute a solution for the subject, but rather a condemnation, or as we said above with Deleuze and the dream of the Other, a devouring nightmare.

Where is Michelstaedter in all this? According to the analysis carried out by Mimmo Cangiano in *The Wreckage of Philosophy*, we see that our protagonist dedicated himself to manufacturing a series of principles that would govern the salvation of those caught in rhetorical games. Quoting Carlo directly, he will say that "to persuade others I have to make my reality 'reasonable' […] And it happens that people blame the means of communication and the circumstances of isolation instead of the irrationality of their reality" (Cangiano, 2019, p. 84). There is in the Italian philosopher a need to bring those he considers rhetoricians to an understanding of existence that allows them to see the irrationality of their reality. It is true that the elaboration that he makes of language as charged with objectified desire has theoretical weight, but throughout the text, we find triggers like these that have been marginalized from Cangiano's analysis, favoring a deep philosophical and political study of the writings.

Although Mimmo points out that Michelstaedter's philosophical complex is not endowed with a timeless or ideal meaning (Cangiano, 2019) but rather with a practical, dialectical knowledge, it does not eradicate the very confinement of the productive and seductive process, transcendent moral, emanating from the omnipotent figure of the persuaded and the powerless rhetorician. If the persuaded is the one who is capable of immersing himself in the contingency of life and not becoming paralyzed in the fear of death and seeking "life insurance" everywhere, Michelstaedter is not castrating, burning the photograph, and letting in silence, and listens to the unknown but defines it precisely as an authoritarian and salvific figure that possesses the access to that Eden that was stolen, namely, *the irrationality and contingency of reality.*

What still defines the persuaded is the Other who is heard in the streets of Gorizia, while the potency, coming from another place, is reduced to its most sadistic and aggressive side, an excess of the death drive, a thanatic desire that continues to inhabit, despite the erudite elaboration of Michelstaedter.

The curious thing is that in several cases, critical theory tends to repeat the same trope: *present misery* vs. *future solution*. A disquisition of the present, a visibility of structural violence as the Frankfurt School did, does not necessarily have to be located in communism or socialism. The insidious rhetorical device allows, as Mimmo recalls, to pretend to be persuaded (Cangiano, 2019, p. 87). In his words, this persuasive veiling of the rhetorical device "permits him to participate in the «absolute»" (Badiou, 2019, p. 87) of society.

As Mimmo says about Carlo's conception of language as a "commodity" (2019, p. 88) in which the rhetorician, as if going through a supermarket, would take over the different labels, words, nomenclatures that would allow him to participate comfortably in society as a whole, its reception and relevance. This does not exist without conflict, he will say, since the definition of a word such as left, right, tolerant, intolerant, fair, or unfair depends on the groups whose pre-existing conditions make up their history and heritage. By considering the language of the rhetoric as a commodity, it does so obviously refer in a pejorative way, since "these words only express the contingent isolation of the individual who is forced to adapt to the «absolute» forms of society" (Cangiano, 2019, p. 92). Carlo himself will say in *Opere* that "as soon as I say I know, I have already been defeated" (Cangiano, 2019, p. 90).

This "absolute" forms of society and its forced entry into its language or the creation of becoming-persuaded as a rhetorician's counter-device are examples of the moral intellectualism to which welcomes our philosopher based on the figure of Socrates, who had overcome the mediocrity of the sophists who have colonized and captured society with lies. From their unions, scientists, defenders of the rule of law, insurance sellers, etc., have marked the limits of knowledge and the rails of sufficiency, objectivity, and naturalistic appearance (Cangiano, 2019).

This criticism is also reminiscent of the "unique" nineteenth-century philosopher, Max Stirner (2000), whose fierce criticism of society and his place in it positioned him in a similar path to that of Michelstaedter: *the contradiction between social morality and particular ethics*. In this clash of demands, we have, on the one hand, a plethora of social ideals, canons, etc., while on the other, the Ideal Ego which does not match, either due to generational change, epochal, or scientific progress, the contradiction becomes patent.

But how can this contradiction, this rivalry, lead us to the tragic event of suicide? At this point, we see that there is "something" that does not fit. Which could be because it is immoral, unfair, exceeds active ideals, is taboo and, therefore, its violation is feared, produces frustration, and leads to aggressive behavior whose parapets are addiction[4] that is the muting of that "something" or the fantasy that enjoys

[4] Note that here addiction refers to its etymological root, whose meaning is not to speak. I understand "a-" as negation and "-dictio," product of phonation, of speech. But also understand the creative nature of this denial, since it is not a total disconnection, but rather a consciousness in which the presence of the ego is diminished. This can, as the very title of Aldous Huxley's 1956 work (2004) already indicates, become the heaven and hell of the Absolute after the blurring, reduction, of the self and the liberation of the erotic and thanatic drives.

suicidal temptation on a daily basis. This nascent anger of what Lacan (1997) works on throughout the seventh seminar, entitled *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, comes from "the thing" or *das Ding*. For Lacan (1997), this "something," this thing, would be located in the register of the Real, which, unlike the Ideal Ego (imaginary) and the Ego Ideal (symbolic), would be an impossible, unattainable place, a kind of absolute neutrality, the highest good, God, etc. This place, the Real, is precisely the one that we lose; this fullness, solid totality, remains pierced by the language that, as Lacan will say in the same seminar, kills the Real.[5]

The curious thing is that killing the Real is something necessary, a process of impure sublimation that *allows something to be done*. Speaking frankly, confession, getting it off your chest, the Greek *parrhesia* picked up by Christianity, allows us to deal with the thing, that "something" that does not fit. As we see in the case of Michelstaedter, there is an attempt to manifest this contradiction but is inhibited, corseted, by the academic, philosophical gaze, etc., thus veiled by citations, the mediocre sayings that he hears in the city that we find in his *tesi di laurea*, the longing for Ancient Greece, in addition to the moral intellectualism that we already discussed.

At the same time, this coded view serves as a bridge[6] between the Ideal Ego and the Ego Ideal and as retention. Control (although full of frustration, continues to function) of what is unspeakable about oneself. Suicide, or its enjoyed fantasy, would become the subject's resolution in the face of this inability to elaborate. For this reason, being able to transmit what one suffers implies going beyond good and evil, beyond the persuaded and the rhetorical, where one can think of the possibility within the impossible, freeing the word from these encodings.

I do not have space here to elaborate what psychoanalysis refers to about fantasy (*fantasme*), but using the analogy of the bridges of the previous paragraph, the construction of the fantasy, extramorally, would allow the subject to deal with the contradiction between reality and his desire. The thing can be, as I have already said, God, Karma, even for atheists, something beyond the word, but it remains that which is unspeakable and incomprehensible. Suicide occurs when the fantasy does not mediate but triumphs instead, either on the side of the Ego Ideal or the Ego Ideal.

Why does the fantasy triumph? As Lacan will say in *Television*, "suicide is the only act that can succeed without misfiring" (1990, p. 43). The introduction of what does not close, of what remains, the common mediocrity, becoming-anyone, is to

[5] When Lacan (1997) talks about language, he refers to the signifier and the inauguration of the pleasure principle that commits the ego to the world and its difficulties. In a question, how do we maintain these pleasures? Through repetition that enables significant inscription. Obviously, there are processes of significance that are conscious, but when we talk about the signifier, we are locating ourselves in an unconscious plane, where something similar to language works; for this reason, it will be said that the unconscious is structured like a language.

[6] As Lacan will say in the *Cahier d'Analise* (*Analysis Notebook*) of 1966, responding to the public attended by some philosophy students, this bridge would function as a suture of the very gap of the subject, "to lock the truth." He will say in the same text that "it is to «save the truth» that the door is closed" (1990, p. 108). What is somehow eluded in philosophy, but not in psychoanalysis, is the place of enunciation in favor of the lucubration of statements.

introduce the unknown in everyday life. Pick up the pieces of what we are and were left behind by that Other, his love for the persuaded and his hate for the rhetoricians silences the pain and hides the pleasures in what remains unspoken, a hidden story.

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Chapter 16
Two-Gun Bob on the Pyre: Robert E. Howard's Suicide in the Context of His Life and Work

Thomas Schwaiger

The chapter traces the most important steps in the life and work of twentieth-century Texas writer Robert E. Howard (1906–1936). The story leading up to Howard's suicide is presented chronologically according to two parallel classifications of his biographical and artistic periods, as well as contextualized through examination of his voluminous correspondence, most notably with various members of the Lovecraft circle in the pulp fiction field, his literary writings, and pertinent pieces of Howardian scholarship. In conclusion, a summary of potential sociocultural, philosophical, contextual, and psychological causes and reasons for Robert E. Howard's self-inflicted death is given.

1 Introduction

This chapter traces important biographical and artistic steps in the life and work of early twentieth-century Texas writer Robert E. Howard. A tireless and respected contributor to the so-called pulp magazines of his time, Howard's varied fictional and poetic output would only begin to gain broader recognition from the mid-1960s on, several decades after his death by suicide at the age of 30. Trying to outline the ways in which aspirations, success, disappointments, and tragedy intertwined during Robert's lifetime in his social roles as a son, friend, partner, and artist, the subsequent sections rely primarily on autobiographical and authorial information gathered from reading a selection of his letters to various people, of his versatile

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literary products, as well as of pertinent pieces of Howardian scholarship that has been gradually evolving over the past 50 years or so.[1]

The story of Robert E. Howard leading up to and contextualizing his ultimate decision and act to kill himself is for the most part presented chronologically. The descriptive frame chosen for this chronology draws on two largely congruent classifications of Howard's personal life and his professional publishing career as an author: the former offers a threefold distinction into a "Texas," an "interim" and the so-called "*Weird Tales* period" (Lord, 1989, p. v), while the latter in a temporally fairly parallel fashion proposes an "early fiction," a "historical fiction," and an "adventure fantasyfiction" period (Vick, 2021, p. 146).

2 Texas and Early Fiction Period

Robert Ervin Howard was born in the small Texan town of Peaster on 22 January 1906. His father, Dr. Isaac Mordecai Howard, was a physician perpetually on the move well into Robert's teenage years, taking his family with him while following cowtown and railroad-and-oil-boomtown opportunities in the region of West Texas. Hester Jane Howard (née Ervin), Isaac's wife and Robert's mother, was running the household and, due to her husband often being away for work, for the better part was in charge of bringing up their only-child son. This has been suggested as one of the earliest causes that could have set the direction for Robert E. Howard's later profession, for "[i]n addition to reading poetry and literature to her son, Hester probably taught Robert to read and write early enough in his life that he was relatively proficient at both by the time he began his own formal education" (Vick, 2021, p. 8).

In 1919, the family finally settled down in Cross Plains, Texas, but "Dr. Howard's wandering spirit" and "incessant wanderlust" (Vick, 2021, pp. 18, 24) in the course of Robert's formative years had very likely already left their mark on the latter. For one thing, it may have considerably contributed to the enormously high value he would forever place on being free, a lifelong desire that in the end he chose to pursue by becoming a writer and a sentiment he summed up concisely in a letter from 1933: "Writing has always been a means to an end I hoped to achieve—freedom" (Howard, 1991, p. 52). On the other hand, it has been speculated that the frequent uprooting during his childhood and its destabilizing effect on his personality may have been one of the reasons underlying his later suicide, in a generalized

[1] The basis of the present essay as such then also fits the area of more psychologically oriented studies of the contemporary author and their suicide in modern literature: "Many writers base their novels and poems on their own experiences, and so their works can be considered autobiographical. This is true, for example, of the novelists Ernest Hemingway and Cesare Pavese and the poets Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, all of whom died by suicide, and some authors have also written diaries and letters which have been preserved" (Lester, 2021, p. 6, see Chaps. 20 and 23 in this book).

way the result of a "lost childhood" like that described for Norma Jeane Mortensen or Baker, aka Marilyn Monroe, as "prevent[ing] the child from having any semblance of a stable home environment during her formative years" (Corso, 2021, p. 74).

Being a voracious reader in boyhood and youth who "read purely for the love of reading" (Howard, 1991, p. 54), when Howard was 15 years old, in 1921, and running out of new books to devour, he made a "literary discovery," which "played a pivotal role" (Vick, 2021, p. 48) in his future writing by buying his first issue of a literature magazine, *Adventure*. The desire to be a writer apparently had already formed a few years before, and he had also created his first character back then, but

> *Adventure* introduced the budding apprentice to several writers whose works were influential: Talbot Mundy, Rafael Sabatini, and Harold Lamb. Other significant writers who influenced Robert's earlier (and later) works include William Shakespeare, Edgar Rice Burroughs, H. Rider Haggard, Jack London, and Rudyard Kipling. (Vick, 2021, p. 48)

Even more significantly, the magazine purchase gave him a clearer idea of how the professional writing career he sought after could eventually start and unfold, namely, through submitting stories to such magazines and get them published there for money. The potential market for carrying out this kind of plan at the time of the 1920s and 1930s has been summarized thus by a contemporary witness and insider:

> To a writer the magazine field was divided into three categories. The so-called quality publications included *Harper's*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The American Mercury* […], *Esquire*, *The New Yorker* […], and Story [sic]. […] However, they paid very little, and the number of people who could write quality stories for the above magazines far exceeded the market. Next in line for a working writer were the "slicks," a number of popular magazines published on smooth paper, which included *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and *Collier's*. For a time, *Liberty*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Redbook* also fell into that group. […] This was the best-paying market. […] The third category of magazines were the pulps, so-called because they were printed on wood-pulp paper. There were many of them, dozens of western and mystery magazines, others publishing science fiction, sports stories, romance, war, and air stories. Two of the best were *Adventure* and *Blue Book*. (L'Amour, 2008, Chap. 16; see also Vick, 2021, esp. pp. 54, 207, endnote 9)

Rather unsurprisingly, *Adventure* was the first magazine Howard almost immediately submitted a story to, but also in terms of quantity of publications, range of subject matters and prospects of payment the pulps would seem to have been the logical choice in trying his luck as a beginning writer. And although his effort for *Adventure* was rejected, his interest in pulp magazines had been ignited and would accompany him for the rest of his life both as a regular reader and, before long, as a regular contributor.

For educational purposes, Howard temporarily moved from Cross Plains to nearby Brownwood in 1922, where he would graduate from the local high school in the following year, and it was there that he met some of his closest and like-minded friends, fellow students like Truett Vinson and Tevis Clyde Smith, who in turn would put him into contact "with two other aspiring local Texas writers, Herbert Klatt and Harold Preece" (Vick, 2021, p. 58). The interaction and correspondence

with these individuals opened a whole new world to Howard and can be said to constitute the culmination point of his biographical Texas period.

Soon thereafter would mark the initiation of Howard's professional early fiction period, during which "[h]e experimented with several genres, such as horror, history, and fantasy," "began to incorporate adventure elements into his stories," and "nailed down his prose pace" (Vick, 2021, p. 147). In 1924, after years of attempting all sorts of pulps in vain, he at last sold a story to *Weird Tales*, an iconic magazine established in 1923 with a focus on horror and fantasyfiction (Vick, 2021), of which Howard would remain a mainstay author until his death. Understandably, he was elated by this success and motivated to continue writing and submitting all sorts of stories to all sorts of pulp magazines. Also, he started a semi-autobiographical novel in the same year, which was completed in 1928 but remained unread by his friends and unpublished during his lifetime. According to Tevis Clyde Smith, Howard once told him that it was going to be called *Post Oaks and Sand Roughs*, this then also being the title under which the work ultimately appeared in 1990 (Lord, 1990). Stylistically, it has been described as "tread[ing] a fine line between" naturalism, "characterized by an objective, detached style of narration, while achieving an exacting accuracy of detail," and realism, which "attempts to present the world as it is, and it is possible that all that truly separates the two schools is the author's attitude" (Goodrich, 2006, p. 27). And while the novel's general literary value may certainly be debated, it is a treasure trove for the Howard enthusiast searching for clues to his "philosophy of life, both in his thoughts and in his actions" (Goodrich, 2006, p. 29).

The content of *Post Oaks and Sand Roughs* covers approximately the years between its inception in 1924 and completion in 1928, recording the experiences of one Steve Costigan, a thinly disguised stand-in for Robert E. Howard himself, and his friends in their native region of West Texas, all of them often equally thinly disguised. On an interesting meta-level, the third-person narrator at one point late in the book states:

> He had determined to write a tale of his own life, seeking to instill an interest therein by a realistic account of the drabness, and sham of small town life, the futile and abortive gropings of humanity, and the failings and ambitions of such strugglers as himself. (Howard, 1990, p. 141)

Earlier in the narrative, Steve already anticipates the fate of such an endeavor by telling his friends Sebastian Selby/Truett Vinson and Clive Hilton/Tevis Clyde Smith: "'Life is full of tag ends which never begin and never end. There's no plot, no sequence, no moral. How are you going to write such stuff as that so it'll sell?'" (Howard, 1990, p. 110). As such, Costigan's reflections and deeds with respect to his different jobs, his writing aspirations, his traveling alone or in company, his interest in boxing, and many other matters of daily routine as related in the novel are frequently paralleled by Howard's remarks in his letters. Steve's outlook on existence is rather cynical but nonetheless delicate, for him appreciating his own work being "the only real excuse for living" yet admitting in the face of rejections that "[h]e was tough-skinned, but there are sensitive nerves under the toughest skin"

(Howard, 1990, pp. 14, 38). This tough skin is fairly obviously exaggerated in statements like "Kill himself because of Clive and a fool girl? Hell!" (Howard, 1990, p. 64), alluding to a revenge prank played on him in Redwood/Brownwood by Clive and the latter's then-girlfriend Gloria/Echla Laxson (see Vick, 2021), and has definitely been shed in passages like the following:

> Better that a man should never look at the stars, for they made him realize the terrible hopelessness and filth of his own existence. Better never to be aware that purity and beauty existed, than to yearn for its attainment in vain. Yet Steve knew that only the glimpses of the stars kept such as he alive. (Howard, 1990, p. 102)

In his correspondence with friends like Smith, Howard sometimes expressed similarly conflicted feelings: "Let us talk of life; I am damnably weary tonight" (1989, p. 9). His outward tough-skinnedness could show when saying that "[e]ach time a man opens his heart he breaks his armor and weakens his battle might" and be undermined in conceding that "when I'm stung, physically or mentally, I'm just like a bull; my only thought is to smash what's in front of me" (Howard, 1989, pp. 19, 11). When Herbert Klatt tragically died "from pernicious anemia at the age of twenty-one" (Vick, 2021, p. 99), Howard commented: "What shall a man say when a friend has vanished behind the doors of Death? A mere tangle of barren words, only words" (1989, p. 16). Moreover, he confessed: "I've got a distorted viewpoint on life and I know how wrong and erroneous it is, but I'm too lazy to change" (1989, p. 22).

In contrast to the bleakness of some of the personal circumstances just described, the years of 1929 and 1930 would also hold more uplifting, even defining, moments in store for Howard. First, his by then already constantly growing success in selling stories to different pulps was now complemented by a growing popularity with the readers of these magazines, initiating his next fiction period. Nevertheless, he still felt largely misunderstood and outcast by his more immediate Cross Plains surroundings, as he makes clear in a letter from February 1930: "The infernal fools can't seem to understand that a man can make his living some other way besides dressing tools or selling stuff, and still be an ordinary human being with human sensations" (Howard, 1989, p. 42). However, this particular dissatisfaction would begin to be considerably compensated owing to a second pleasant surprise, namely, a letter he received from Providence, Rhode Island, in August 1930, written by Howard Phillips Lovecraft, also a regular on the pages of *Weird Tales* and one of Howard's greatest heroes in the pulp fiction field.[2]

[2] This may in fact be a bit of an understatement, as demonstrated by a touching remark from a letter to Lovecraft penned by Isaac Howard a few weeks after his son's death and relating the circumstances of the suicide: "Lest I worry you with this I will close, but will say in conclusion Mr. Lovecraft, that Robert was a great admirer of you. I have often heard him say that you were the best Weird writter [sic] in the world and he keenly enjoyed corresponding with you. Often expressed hope that you might visit in our home some day, so that he, his mother and I might see and know you personally" (Lovecraft & Howard, 2017, p. 966).

3 Interim and Historical Fiction Period

The story of how H. P. Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard came into epistolary contact would deserve detailed attention of its own but can only be briefly touched upon here (Derie, 2019; Vick, 2021): Howard, a very knowledgeable amateur scholar concerning the history of Celtic Britain, read the reprint of the early Lovecraft tale "The Rats in the Walls" in the June 1930 issue of *Weird Tales*, featuring a Gaelic phrase toward the end, which really should be Cymric so as to conform to the story's southern England setting. Lovecraft was aware of this inaccuracy but justified it as a minor bit of artistic license, which in his opinion nobody would ever notice. However, Howard not only noticed it but also wrote to *Weird Tales* editor Farnsworth Wright about it, praising the tale as well as pointing out some historical debates surrounding the Gaelic-Cymric question, a letter that Wright forwarded to Lovecraft, who in turn was so impressed by Howard's sharp eye and knowledge that he immediately contacted him directly. This sparked a regular and voluminous correspondence between the two lasting until Howard's death a little less than six years later.

The letters exchanged between the Texan and the New England writer covered many topics, from the personal (by April 1932, Lovecraft had given Howard his now-famous nickname "'Two-Gun' [Bob]" [Derie, 2019, p. 55]) to the professional to the political to the historical and philosophical, though one stands unchallenged as "the central focus of the correspondence—the relative merits of 'civilisation' (as conceived by Lovecraft) and 'barbarism' (as envisioned by Howard)" (Joshi et al., 2017, p. 9). Another prominent topic were naturally the two authors' respective works, Howard now being in his historical fiction period, "using aspects of the history he was researching at this time, as well as the history he had read earlier" (Vick, 2021, p. 147). Popular Howardian key characters of this period were Bran Mak Morn the Pict, Solomon Kane the Puritan, and Kull the Atlantean. Furthermore, 1932 saw the creation and first publication of his best-known character, Conan the Barbarian, all of which "helped establish Robert E. Howard as one of the cornerstone progenitors of a new species of modern fantasyfiction" (Vick, 2021, p. 95) now commonly referred to as "sword and sorcery" (Hoffman & Cerasini, 2020, p. 99).

Regarding Howard's psyche, all the new inspiring correspondence and literary success could not completely erase his somber traits, as evinced by the following contemplation in a letter to Harold Preece:

> The tang of fall is in the air and the whisper of autumn in the skies. Summer is waning into the yellow leaves of all the yesterdays, and the heart of me is thin and old. The sky is deep and blue and mysterious with the changing of the seasons, and strange thoughts stir deep in me, but age forever steals on me in the autumn of the year, and though I am young, my soul is old and wavering like a thread-bare garment outworn. (Howard, 1989, p. 65)

Self-aware of his moods, he explained to Lovecraft:

> I believe […] that the gloominess in my own nature can be partly traced to the surroundings of a locality in which I spent part of my babyhood. It was a long, narrow valley, lonesome

> and isolated, up in the Palo Pinto hill country. It was very sparsely settled and its name, Dark Valley, was highly descriptive. (Howard, 1989, p. 73)

At other times, he seemed unemotionally fatalistic when briefly stating, again to Lovecraft, "That's Life–fighting shadows, taking lickings that you can't return" (Howard, 1989, p. 83) or, in reply to a request for biographical information from Farnsworth Wright, the first to accept some of Howard's writings for publication back in 1924: "Every now and then one of us finds the going too hard and blows his brains out, but it's all in the game, I reckon" (Howard, 1991, p. 10). And seemingly also self-aware of his numerous contradictions, he entered the final years of his life with the insight that "[i]t's just another incongruity of nature that a man as peace-loving as I am should be so violently interested in deeds of gore, and be unable to realistically write about anything else" (Howard, 1991, p. 32).

4 *Weird Tales* and Adventure Fantasy Fiction Period

Throughout the interim period, Howard had established himself "as part of the group of notable *Weird Tales* authors" (Derie, 2019, p. 54) forming the circle of Lovecraft's regular correspondents across the United States, and from 1933 onward, he regularly corresponded with many of the others as well, including eminent figures like August William Derleth in Wisconsin, Clark Ashton Smith in California (Derie, 2019), Robert Hayward Barlow in Florida (Derie, 2019), and Edgar Hoffmann Price in Louisiana (the only one of them he would ever meet in person), to name just a few. At the same time, Howard's fictional output had evolved in that now his "primary attention was on adventure fantasy, set in the Hyborian Age [of Conan] he created" (Vick, 2021, p. 148). And on a much more personal level, he had a complicated and eventually failing relationship with one Novalyne Price, an ambitious young teacher with early feminist views, during the last years of his life (Vick, 2021).

As to his career, there are indications that Howard "may not have realized how successful he was at the time" (Vick, 2021, p. 108) and was generally disillusioned by the writing profession. This shows, for instance, when he hypothesizes the following to Lovecraft about his favorite writer Jack London, long believed to also have died by suicide:

> The reason Jack lost interest in literature and in life, was because he came at last to realize that the aims, pretenses and aspirations of Art and artists are basically and ultimately as empty, futile and meaningless as those of the wallowing masses. (Lovecraft & Howard, 2017, p. 550)

That this was in essence Howard's own bleak sentiment becomes clear in another letter to Lovecraft shortly afterwards: "I believe that *all* human desires, aims and pretensions are ultimately futile and empty, leading from nothing to nothing; I do not exclude the aims of art" (Howard, 1991, p. 48). But the true tragedy commenced due to an illness of someone very close to him.

The health of Hester Howard, who had been suffering from tuberculosis for some time, was now rapidly declining, changing more or less everything in the household of three. With the father still often being away for work, mostly the son took care of his mother at their Cross Plains home, as before she had "made sure that Robert had the freedom he needed to focus on his work," a reversal of roles in what Novalyne Price had experienced as a "symbiotic relationship" and later has even been likened to a "business partnership" (Vick, 2021, p. 122). Hester's medical treatments were expensive and a considerable financial strain on the family. Robert wanted to contribute as much as possible but was forced trying to break into new literary markets since *Weird Tales*, itself strained by the Great Depression, already owed him a large sum of money for several published stories (Derie, 2019). These constraints in turn interfered with his extraordinary strive for freedom in writing and life in general, yet he seemed selflessly determined when informing Lovecraft about his mother's condition: "There seems to be little we or anyone can do to help her, though God knows I'd make any sacrifice, including my own life, if it could purchase her any relief" (Howard, 1991, p. 76). A few years earlier, Howard had written a "weird western" tale called "The Valley of the Lost," an innovative blend of horror and frontier story (Hoffman & Cerasini, 2020) that can be taken as an example of "literary suicides as case studies […] which may serve as archetypes of suicidal behavior and which may provide insights into suicidal behavior" (Lester, 2021, p. 4, see also his Chap. 20 in this book). For unlike his unshakable trademark characters, this story's protagonist, John Reynolds, makes an unsettling discovery, and "sickened and horrified by the terrible knowledge he has gained, he shoots himself in the head" (Hoffman & Cerasini, 2020, p. 223). In this connection, it has been pointed out that, "[l]ike Reynolds, Howard too was aware of 'the grinning skull beneath the mask of life,' and Reynolds's suicide prefigures Howard's own" (Hoffman & Cerasini, 2020, p. 224).

A remarkable passage from one of Howard's last letters is the following, addressed to August Derleth:

> I am indeed sorry to learn of the deaths in your family. Death to the old is inevitable, and yet somehow I often feel that it is a greater tragedy than death to the young. When a man dies young he misses much suffering, but the old have only life as a possession and somehow to me the tearing of a pitiful remnant from weak old fingers is more tragic than the looting of a life in its full rich prime. I don't want to live to be old. I want to die when my time comes, quickly and suddenly, in the full tide of my strength and health. (1991, p. 77)

About a month later, in the morning of 11 June 1936, Hester Howard having slipped into a coma the day before from which her son was told she would never awaken, Robert "walked to his car, and rolled up the windows. He paused a moment, then put a gun to his head and pulled the trigger" (Vick, 2021, p. 137). Although surviving at first, he died after approximately eight hours, his mother following him after another 31 hours. Isaac Howard buried both of them on 14 June 1936. A few weeks later, the latter informed Lovecraft in a letter:

> These lines were found on a strip of paper in his bill folder in his hip pocket after he shot himself. The lines follow:

> All fled—all done, so lift me on the pyre—
> The Feast is over and the lamps expire.
>
> I do not know whether these words were a quotation or orriginal [sic], but they were typed no doubt shortly before his death. (Lovecraft & Howard, 2017, p. 965)[3]

5 Conclusions

Given the wealth of pertinent material and limitations of available space, the present chapter on Robert E. Howard's life, work, and death is necessarily incomplete. Still, several contextual factors potentially relevant for the author's suicide can be discerned throughout the different periods described: socioculturally, he was influenced by his at times rather rough Texas social and natural environment, the self-esteem-related and economic ups and downs in his chosen career as a writer, as well as his intensive contact with the members of the Lovecraft circle. Philosophically, he was shaped by a somewhat pessimistic outlook on life and human existence more generally, which through his idealization of barbarism time and again crossed over into outright existentialism. As a decisive factor of the immediate context, it is obvious that his mother's fatal illness triggered the final events leading to his self-inflicted death. Psychologically, however, one has to be careful before making a definitive assessment.

Commentators have frequently jumped to conclusions concerning Howard's mental state, both during his life in general and immediately before his suicide, deducing that he must have been "at least a little bit crazy" given his occasional eccentricities, "the fact that [he] lived at home until he was thirty years old and had only one serious girlfriend," as well as his "shooting himself in the head on the day when he was told that his mother was surely dying" (Gramlich, 2006, p. 98). But it is important to see that "Robert E. Howard did *all* these things, the typical and the odd, but he did a lot more of the 'normal' things than he did the strange" (Gramlich, 2006, p. 99). Untenable "Freudian speculations" as to, for example, "unresolved Oedipal impulses" should be abandoned in preference of "Occam's Razor, which basically says that the simplest explanation is usually the best" (Gramlich, 2006, pp. 100, 101). Accordingly, "many of Howard's so-called eccentric behaviors might be explained by noting very clearly that Howard was a *writer*" (Gramlich, 2006, p. 102) who literally lived his profession. When it comes to his death, "[a]t the moment when he pulled the trigger, was Howard in his right mind? The evidence suggests not. But considering the strain he was under, that evidence also suggests that he was experiencing a very common human emotional state" (Gramlich, 2006, p. 104). From a statistical perspective, his act fell squarely into the expected: "Howard was male, white, single, from Texas, and he shot himself with a borrowed pistol" (Gramlich, 2006, p. 104).

[3] In actual fact, the suicide note in question is a paraphrase and recombination of several lines from the poem *The House of Caesar* by poetess Viola Garvin (Hoffman & Cerasini, 2020; Vick, 2021).

Could Howard's suicide have been prevented? It seems unlikely. His father had actually been aware that he might take such a course and "was watching Robert as this was premeditated and I knew it but I did not think that he would kill himself before his mother went" (Lovecraft & Howard, 2017, p. 964). Stopping people who are determined to die can be very hard to downright impossible (Berman, 2021), although in Two-Gun Bob's case, this can merely remain pure conjecture. Fortunately, his writings have survived for the enjoyment of past, present, and future generations.

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Chapter 17
The Confusing Anxiety of Ryūnosuke Akutagawa

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Ryūnosuke Akutagawa stands as one of the most emblematic Japanese writers, and his works have had a wide distribution in the western countries. He is regarded as the father of the modern Japanese short story, and he was even recognized during his short lifetime. He was a sickly and nervous child and a morbidly sensitive adult filled with a profound pessimism. He was branded by his fear of madness, for he was worried about inheriting his mother's mental illness. He is the author of different stories and *haikus*. A devoted follower of August Strindberg and Edgar Allan Poe, Akutagawa only wrote a short novel, *Kappa*. His stories show a certain tendency toward what is gloomy and sinister, and they are filled with supernatural elements, with death, tedium, and madness as recurrent topics. The Japanese author suffered from nervous breakdowns, which worsened over time. He had chronic insomnia and visual hallucinations, and he asserted to feel a vague insecurity, a confusing concern (*bonyari shita fuan*). Ryūnosuke Akutagawa committed suicide in the early morning of July 24, 1927, at the age of 35, through an overdose of Veronal while he was reading the Bible. The final phase of Akutagawa's literary career was marked by his deteriorating physical and mental health, and his last autobiographical writings are a clear example of his mental decline. *A Fool's Life* and, above all, "Spinning Gears" are especially illustrative. The latter shows in detail the author's fears and obsessions, his destructive wishes, and his premonitions of failure, madness, and death: an invisible force drives our life, and the colors of the real world stand as messengers of good news (green), peace (blue, pink), or misfortune (yellow). In his work "A Note to a Certain Old Friend," written shortly before his death, he develops the idea of suicide in a very explicit way.

Ryūnosuke Akutagawa is a respected writer and, we could say, a true institution in Japan, to the point that the highest literary award in that country bears his name.

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However, his life was marked by personal and professional ups and downs, which in his later years took on tragic overtones. He was sometimes criticized for considering his works excessively foreign, that is, western, although he, a great devotee of western literature, especially English, always tried to combine the setting of historical and present Japan with the universal dramas that have always troubled humanity. As a lover and reader of Edgar Allan Poe, it is not strange that he transferred the intimate and personal terror and anguish of the brilliant American author to the country of the Rising Sun. However, his suicide did not respond to any ancestral Japanese custom but was due, in his own words, to a "confused anxiety" ("bon'yari shita fuan," "ぼんやりした不安") for what the future held for him. Always situated between West and East, Akutagawa was anything but a corporatist writer, an enthusiastic and convinced member of a cohesive society. On the contrary, his oversensitive, obsessive, unhealthy nature, his fascination with aesthetics, and an inexhaustible intellectual curiosity led him to a staunch individualism, which, in turn, was to lead him to a painful sense of incomprehension and maladjustment. He was a stranger among strangers. At the age of 35, burdened by debts and economic obligations and in a deplorable mental state, he ingested an overdose of Veronal in his own home at dawn in July 1927, while his family was asleep. His wife discovered his body the next morning. The writer's suicide was widely reported in the country's press, causing a great commotion, perhaps disproportionate to the fame he achieved during his lifetime.

Unlike many other suicides, writers or not, Akutagawa left, apart from other works in which in a more or less veiled way he announced his intentions, a letter in which he explained the reason for his suicide: the "confused anxiety" mentioned above. In his case, genetic, environmental, and fortuitous factors come together. He himself had observed in the collection of aphorisms "Words of a Dwarf" (published in 1925) that "inheritance, environment and accident in short, are the three that decide our destiny" (1987, p. 614). A similar idea will be expressed in *Kappa*, from the mouth of one of the characters, the philosopher Mag.

I will outline the most significant facts of Akutagawa's biography, relating them to the author's works, especially those written during the last year of his life, as well as the farewell letter written a few days before his suicide.

1 A Different Kind of Japanese

Akutagawa's brief life was not a particularly happy one. Shortly after his birth, his mother, already distraught over the death a year earlier of her eldest daughter, would go mad, and he would be placed in the care of his uncle, his mother's brother, and his wife, a wealthy married couple who had no children and who would officially adopt him at the age of ten after his mother's death.

From an early age, Akutagawa showed an interest in literature, which was shared by his adoptive family, who did not oppose the young man's desire to become a writer. If his family had introduced him to the Chinese and Japanese classics, he was

to discover western authors on his own, among them Edgar Allan Poe, whose gloom satisfied Akutagawa's predisposition for the phantasmagoric and somber. Like the genius of Boston, Akutagawa would write a multitude of short stories, but no novel, with the exception of the short novel *Kappa* (2010) (as Poe wrote *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* [1998]). The work of the Japanese author is usually divided into two periods: the historical works and the autobiographical ones. Rubio places the short story "The Mandarins" (2012), published in 1919) as a transition point between the two, although he recognizes the relative artificiality of this division, since in his historical works "the past is no more than the routine framing at the service of the artistic expression of a very intimate reality" (2011, p. 10). Thus, past times offer a framework in which the narrative unfolds, but it is merely a decor: the protagonists are the characters, with their passions, fears, and obsessions.

In 1921, there was a turning point in his life, which would find its reflection in his work. The newspaper he worked for sent him to China, a long and difficult trip during which he fell ill. His health, originally delicate, visibly weakened. Another event made an impression on him from which he never recovered: the 1923 earthquake that devastated Tokyo, which gave him the opportunity to witness images more hellish than those painted by Yoshihide in the famous story "Hell Screen" (Akutagawa, 1948). As his physical and mental condition deteriorated, his works took on an increasingly personal character.

Rubio offers an illuminating picture of his suffering:

> The months of January and February 1926 were spent in Yugawara, a health resort. His insomnia had worsened, he was heavily medicated, and his fear of dementia was an obsession. He lived in a constant state of anxiety, aggravated by the fact that he dared not discuss his situation with anyone for fear of being confined to a sanatorium. He suffered from auditory hallucinations and persecutory mania. Even in the middle of the day he insisted on keeping his room in the dark, from which he went in and out only when it became dark. This feverish activity of a mind that seems to feed only on hallucinations and coincidences is illustrated in the constant entrances and exits of the hotel, as described in "Gears." His wife would later recall that, when he was at home, he would lie down in the middle of the bedroom for fear that the walls would collapse. If she left the room for a moment, when she returned, she would find him shivering with fear. Sleeping pills were not enough, and at the end of 1926 he began to find relief in opium. When neither opium nor morphine was enough, the idea of suicide probably became increasingly familiar. (2011, pp. 33–34)

We arrive at the nefarious year of 1927. At that time, his mind seemed, judging by his works, already possessed by the idea of suicide. In January, his brother-in-law Yutaka, husband of his younger sister Hisa, killed himself. Apart from the tragedy of the event itself, Akutagawa had to take care of the widow and her children, which did not help his already dwindling finances. In May, his friend Uno Kōji suffered a nervous breakdown and was admitted to a sanatorium. On July 24, Akutagawa poisoned himself, ending his life.

Although this gradual physical and mental decline led him to prefer (with the exception of *Kappa*, from 1927) to write aphorisms and snippets of life in preference to short stories, thus inaugurating the period of his "autobiographical" works, death was already very present in his work since 1915, when he wrote his first short story, "Rashomon" (2006), when he was barely 20 years old. In this macabre story,

a servant and an old woman fight over the belongings of corpses abandoned in a half-ruined temple, over which crows hover, ready to sink their beaks into the dead flesh. The image of the old woman pulling out the hair of a female corpse with the intention of making a wig out of it and selling it seems to be the fruit of a horrifying hallucination.

The aforementioned "Hell Screen" (1948) deserves special mention, one of the most shocking and horrifying tales of modern literature, which may remind us of Poe's story "The Oval Portrait" (1998). If in the work of the American writer the painter achieves a masterpiece by extracting from his beloved the vital fluid to transfer it to the canvas, which causes her death, in "Hell Screen" the painter Yoshihide needs to witness real horrors to reproduce them, with total verisimilitude, in his works. When his master orders him to paint a screen representing the Buddhist hells, he does not hesitate to paint a lady who is burned alive and who turns out to be his own daughter, whom he sacrifices for his art, which will cost him his life as well, since, once the hellish screen is finished, he ends up hanging himself. Most of the writer's stories will not go to such extremes of horror, but even when they are intended to be comic—as is the case with "The Nose" (2006)—they are tremendously cruel.

We could think of Akutagawa as a Yoshihide who, during his life, exorcised his demons through his stories. He needed, like Yoshihide, his life to become a horror, but he did not inflict torture on others, but on himself, and having left testimony of those horrors, he ended his life.

Kurachi (1991) sees a parallel between what the author did and, nine years earlier, Yoshihide in "Hell Screen" and states that, although Akutagawa himself recognized that in every work the author's personality comes through, he was reluctant to talk about himself in his works as a defense mechanism against a hostile world in relation to which he wanted to fit in and at the same time take revenge on it.

For his part, Tsurutawa (1970) points out that few men have suffered as intensely as Akutagawa from the sense of alienation from family, society, and nature, something common among westerners today, but rare among the Japanese of his time. Even more significant was the way he dealt with that alienation, refusing, unlike many of his compatriots, to dissolve his ego into a larger entity, preferring instead to withdraw into his melancholy, thinking about the sickness of the world. It is inevitable to wonder about the conception of suicide in the Eastern culture in which Akutagawa grew up and the writer's relationship to that conception. But what is certain is that Japan's most iconic writer was a hypersensitive individualist, morbidly inclined, and given to self-reflection, a man who did not seem to belong anywhere.

2 Religion, Aesthetics, and Suicide

As I have said, in "Words of a Dwarf" (1987), Akutagawa had pointed out that our life is governed by heredity, environment, and accident. In the novel *Kappa*, the character of Mag adds faith to the equation, stating that "[o]ur destiny is governed

by three elements, only: faith, environment and chance. No doubt you humans would add the hereditary factor as a fourth element" (2010, pp. 87–88).

Among various books and documents found around the writer's corpse was a Bible. In *The Man from the West*, Akutagawa (2011) confessed that, ten years earlier, he had an artistic love for Christianity, especially Catholicism. Later, his interest focused on the psychology of the martyr and, finally, on the character of Christ, about whom, beyond attributing geographical or historical features, he was attracted by his essence, being for him a poetic religion. Doak (2011) cites Sako's view that Akutagawa failed to apprehend the teachings of the Gospels because of his overreliance on the intellect, while Doak himself wonders whether Akutagawa died because he could not bear the pain of seeking but not finding Christ, or whether he died of a mental illness that he himself had anticipated and that had prepared him to turn to Christ at the end of his life. In any case, Akutagawa's appreciation of Catholic art and the poetry of Christianity fits well with his status as an aesthete, which he made clear in his famous dispute with Junichiro Tanizaki. Throughout 1927, Akutagawa had a discussion with Tanizaki about the importance of plot in a novel, that is, of the events that, in chronological order, are narrated in the story. Tanizaki considered the plot to be the backbone of the novel, the fundamental element, while Akutagawa deferred its importance in favor of images and the intensity of the word.

In any case, the interest that Christianity aroused in the writer did not prevent his suicide, unequivocally condemned by this religion, but, as we shall see in commenting on his farewell letter, he was concerned about the aesthetics of his own suicide.

Enthusiasts (nowadays very abundant) of suicide by external causes, as Dostoevsky would say (according to the Russian writer, suicides could occur for external or internal causes, and "[o]nly vulgar natures commit suicide for material, visible, external reasons" [2007, p. 316]), would point out that Akutagawa's suicide occurred for whatever reasons could have been avoided. However, the writer's confused restlessness, the anguish, originated only within himself. Not even specific causes were able to push him to suicide, but rather increased the anguish already present, to the point that he himself was unable to explain why he was putting an end to his life. It is always comforting to be able to attribute the causes of an evil (and today suicide is considered an evil) to identifiable facts: not only do they offer us the illusory hope of being able to avoid it, but they also spare us one of the sensations most hated by human beings: uncertainty. As Camus said in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, "[a] world that we can explain, even with bad reasons, is a familiar world" (1975, p. 13). It is therefore disturbing not to be able to explain such an extreme act as suicide, not to be able to identify its cause or catalog it. Durkheim, in this seminal work, from 1897, *Suicide* (2002), asserted that suicides were produced in relation to the interaction of the individual with society, and depending on this, the act could be classified as selfish, anomic, or altruistic (see Chap. 6 in this book, esp. Section 2.1). Shneidman (1980) believed that suicide was a reaction to unbearable and multifactorial psychological pain that could occur perfectly well in mentally healthy subjects (Chávez-Hernández & Leenaars, 2010). Any horror that can be represented is less horror precisely because of that. Who knows if the lord of Horikawa, by ordering Yoshihide to paint the screen of hell, did not want to put an end to his own

particular hell, whether it was the frustrated love for the painter's daughter or the tedium that consumed his soul.

Akutagawa's sensitive mood, lonely in a hostile environment, overtaken by events, anxious, and melancholic, is often shown in his characters, many of them subjected to mistreatment, or misfits who function in a world they neither understand nor understand them. It is alienation in capital letters. The narrator of "The Mandarins" needs to witness how a young girl traveling with him on the same train says goodbye to her siblings by throwing those fruits at them to forget, "even if only ephemerally, both my fatigue and weariness and this incomprehensible, vulgar and tedious life" (Akutagawa, 2012, p. 43). And Genkaku, the protagonist of the narrative of the same name,

> [d]espite his desperate attempts to rescue from his memory some pleasant memory that could alleviate the depression he was experiencing, he was unable to find in his already long life anything but miserable events. The only exception was his childhood memories, which no one but him came to know. (Akutagawa, 2012, pp. 134–135)

3 Last Works

The two stages of Akutagawa's literary life have been discussed, but in reality, it is quite possible that, throughout his life, Akutagawa was incapable of writing about anything other than himself. There is no caesura between his later writings and his earlier ones, only that the author's literary introspection becomes more evident since he uses the protagonist narrator in his stories, postponing the third person narrator or the witness narrator: the servant who witnesses the horrors of Yoshihide's story is Akutagawa himself. In any case, it cannot be denied that in the writings of the last year of his life, 1927, the unbearable psychological pain to which Shneidman (1980) referred to is evident.

In "Death Register," Akutagawa talks about his mother, his older sister, and his father. He begins with these words, "[m]y mother was crazy. I never once felt filial affection for my mother" (2011, p. 89). He recounts that his mother never took care of him and even hit him once, but that he was generally a quiet person. He also refers to his older sister, Hatsuko, who died before he was born, and for whom, without knowing why, he feels affection.

> Sometimes, like a mirage, I feel that there is a woman under forty, who could be my mother or my sister, protecting my life from somewhere. Although maybe it's all a product of my nerves exhausted by coffee and tobacco. Or maybe it's the work of a supernatural force that occasionally appears in the real world. (2011, pp. 93–94)

About his father, he recounts his last meeting in the hospital, but does not remember what his funeral was like, except that "when they moved his body from the hospital to the house, the top of the hearse was illuminated by a large spring moon" (2011, p. 96), an image that reminds us of the lyricism of a haiku.

In his later works, Akutagawa went from thinking about the death that raged over his literary characters to thinking about that of those close to him, and soon he will speak of his own. He does not like to visit graves and would like to forget about the three deceased relatives, but he cannot, and wonders if any of them were ever happy in his lifetime.

In the work "Spinning Gears" (2006), he narrates autobiographical episodes rich in references to hallucinations, ghosts, destructive desires, and presentiments of misfortune and death that take the form of strange coincidences, showing himself to be incredibly apprehensive and superstitious. Thus, he tells the story of a ghost who appears in a house and is dressed in a raincoat. He then tells of the death of his brother-in-law, run over by a train, who was wearing a raincoat, something, he says, unusual for the time of year. He also refers to some semitransparent gears whose number increases until they block his field of vision for a while, after which an intense headache appears (today we can recognize the description of a migraine with aura). In his hotel room, from which he enters and leaves, he has gloomy presentiments and is prey to irrational beliefs such as that green is the color of luck and yellow the color of misfortune (in a bookstore, he rejects a book because its covers are yellow, opting for another with green covers); the disappearance of some object around him causes him panic, he fears fires, and he feels lonely and anguished in the crowd (he reminds us again of Poe, one of whose stories is entitled, precisely, *The Man of the Crowd* [1998]). He perceives hostile presences, and to distract himself, he goes to a *café*, calming himself before the pink color of the walls and the bluish haze of cigarette smoke, reminiscent of one of his admired Baudelaire's little prose poems, *The Double Room* ("[a] room reminiscent of a reverie, a truly spiritual room, where the atmosphere, stagnant, has a slight pink and blue tinge" [1919, p. 161]). He is tormented by the sunlight, frightened by the possibility of going mad but refuses to go into a mental hospital for fear of never coming out again. He is incapable of enduring suffering without sleeping pills. And he wonders, at the end of the work, if someone will one day do him the favor of strangling him in his sleep, just as (according to the testimony of Dr. Moran, who attended him in his agony) Poe said that his best friend would be the one who shot him.

Among the autobiographical works of that fateful year, he introduces the fantastic novel *Kappa*, which narrates the visit of a human in the world of some curious and chameleonic beings, among whom he will meet several archetypes of social roles: Judge Pep, Doctor Chak, student Lap, fisherman Bop, Gael the capitalist, philosopher Mag, Tok the poet, Craback the musician. Several of them seem to speak through the writer's mouth, like Tok, who postulates that the artist creates only for the pleasure of creating and that notions of good and evil have no place in art. Tok commits suicide when he realizes that his art is mediocre, and before his corpse, Craback rejoices: the death of his friend has given him the idea to compose a funeral march in his honor. Mag discusses the necessity of the existence of an entity beyond life for it to have meaning, and Tok (speaking, now deceased, from the afterlife) deals with consistent suicides who effectively put an end to their lives, such as Mainländer, Kleist, or Weininger, ironizing on Schopenhauer, who, despite considering existence a misfortune, never killed himself (see Chap. 10 in this book).

The Life of a Stupid Man contains snippets of Akutagawa's life, arranged almost chronologically. In the dedication to his friend Kume Masao, dated June 23, 1927, when he had already decided to commit suicide, he states that:

> I am now living in the most unhappy happiness of all. But, strange as it may seem, I am not sorry. I am simply sorry for the people who have had as bad a husband, as bad a son, and as bad a father as I have had. So, goodbye. (2011, p. 149)

He goes on to unpack how books and authors seem more real and commendable to him than human beings ("[l]ife is worth no more than a sentence by Baudelaire" [Akutagawa, 2011, p. 150]); memories of his dead mother and his aunt, for whom he felt great affection; the impact on him of the news of the death of the great writer Natsume Soseki, whom he considered his teacher; the way in which, already at the age of 28, he did not feel the slightest joy at being alive, but found solace in Voltaire, who gave him artificial wings (like those possessed by the poet in Baudelaire's *The Albatros* [1919]), and with them, he took flight, forgetting what happened to Icarus; the birth of his first child, about whom he wonders why he has come to a world full of suffering (the same theme appears in *Kappa*, where, in a fantastic way, children speak from the first moment of life, and the first thing they are asked, being about to give birth, is whether they want to be born); the disasters that occurred in the Tokyo earthquake, which he himself witnessed; the fact that the gods, although unhappy, cannot kill themselves, unlike humans; a suicide pact that, although it did not materialize, reaffirmed him in the idea of death as the bearer of peace and tranquility; the insanity of his friend Uno Kōji… In this work, we can see how the writer is steadily approaching suicide, of which he himself is perfectly aware, affirming that fate is approaching him to destroy him and that he can feel the force that controls everyone, as it controlled Gogol. Akutagawa feels much closer to dead writers than to living people: he knows that he will soon cease to belong to the latter and join the ranks of the former.

4 The Farewell

In "A Note to a Certain Old Friend," written in the same month of July 1927, also addressed to Kume Masao, Akutagawa states that external circumstances such as economic hardship and physical or mental illness (from all of which he himself suffered) do not explain all the motivation of the suicide and that generally they are not even motives, but show the path that leads to motivation, but that in his case, everything is reduced to a confused anguish. He admits that for the last two years, he has been thinking only of dying and that at that time he read Philipp Mainländer, who described the process toward death skillfully and in abstract language.

He had already written about Mainländer in "Words of a Dwarf":

> Philipp Mainländer describes the attraction to death. In fact, by chance, our mind is captured by it; we can hardly get rid of it. Moreover, although thought seems to revolve in concentric circles, each circle implies one more and gradually leads us to the center and to death…. (1987, p. 614)

The German philosopher Philipp Mainländer (1841–1876), in his work *Philosophy of Redemption* (published in 1874–1876), believed that God himself wanted to die, that he preferred Nothingness to Being, and that his death signified the appearance of the phenomenal world, since the unity that was God disintegrated into a multiplicity of objects (see Chap. 10 in this book). These objects, which are all the beings that compose the world, have the same tendency toward death that God had. The process, according to Mainländer, is as follows:

1. God wanted non-being.
2. His essence was the obstacle to enter immediately into non-being.
3. The essence had to disintegrate into a world of plurality, whose particular beings all have the tendency toward non-being.
4. In this tendency, these beings hinder each other, fight with each other, and thus weaken their strength.
5. The whole essence of God passed into the world with an altered form, as a certain sum of force.
6. The whole world, the universe, has one goal, non-being, and attains it through the continuous weakening of its sum of force.
7. In its course of development, each individual is led, through the weakening of its force, to the point where its tendency to annihilation can be fulfilled. (1996, pp. 326–327)

The fascination that Mainländer (who anticipated both Nietzsche's death of God and Freud's death drive) exerted on Akutagawa is not surprising. The philosopher, uniting practice with theory, hanged himself at the age of 34.

Continuing with "A Note to a Certain Old Friend," Akutagawa describes the circumstances of the execution of the suicide under three premises: the suicide had to be painless and aesthetic; his family did not have to notice his intentions; no one could see his corpse except his family. Having decided this, he recognizes that a part of him clung to life (the so-called life drive or Freudian Eros, already earlier designated by Schopenhauer as "will to live" [2010]):

> We people, being human animals, have an instinctive fear of death. The so-called vital force, in reality, is nothing more than another name for animal force. I, too, am part of the species of human animals. However, the abhorrence I feel towards food and women is probably an indication of the gradual loss of that animal force. (2011, p. 186)

He does not cease to appreciate beauty, even in the last moments of his life. In fact, he recognizes that, paradoxically, having one foot in the grave makes nature seem more beautiful to him than ever. This sentiment expresses nostalgia, farewell, the outside elements will no longer bother him, "I have finished the preparations coldly, and now I am just playing with death" (Akutagawa, 2011, p. 185).

Akutagawa's epitaph could be this: "I have seen, loved and understood more than others. Among all the accumulated suffering, that is the only thing I can be satisfied with" (2011, p. 186).

Beauty, albeit the beauty of horror, is ever present in Akutagawa, as is the idea of art for art's sake. Yoshihide, the painter of the screen of hell, watches in horror as the maiden who burns alive inside the carriage turns out to be his daughter, but having passed that moment of dread, he lets himself be carried away by the shocking scene and does not hesitate to paint the sketch. The artist later committed suicide. In the same way, Akutagawa wished to die in an aesthetic way, and in the last moments of

his life, he appreciated the beauty of nature. In life and in death, one must always seek the beautiful.

This reminds us of Akutagawa's teacher, Natsume Soseki, and the end of his well-known novel *I Am a Cat,* in which the unnamed feline, close to drowning by accident, reflects:

> I'd better stop. I just don't care what happens next. I've had quite enough, thank you, of this clutching, clawing, scratching, scraping, scrabbling, senseless struggle against nature. The decision made, I give up and relax: first my fore-paws, then my hind-legs, then my head and tail. Gradually I begin to feel at ease. I can no longer tell whether I'm suffering or feeling grateful. It isn't even clear whether I'm drowning in water or lolling in some comfy room. And it really doesn't matter. It does not matter where I am or what I'm doing. I simply feel increasingly at ease. No, I can't actually say that I feel at ease, either. I feel that I've cut away the sun and moon, they pull at me no longer; I've pulverized both Heaven and Earth, and I'm drifting off and away into some unknown endlessness of peace. I am dying, Egypt, dying. Through death I'm drifting slowly into peace. Only by dying can this divine quiescence be attained. May one rest in peace! I am thankful, I am thankful. Thankful, thankful, thankful. (2002, p. 453)

Perhaps we should stop despairing at not finding meaning in what may not make sense and wanting to avoid the inevitable. Akutagawa accepted his fate, as did Soseki's fantastic cat character, who, concluding that he could not fight against nature, died giving thanks.

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Chapter 18
Through the Mask. Behind Osamu Dazai's Smile

Andrea Marín Gil

This chapter will briefly but intensely address both the historical and life conditions in which Osamu Dazai found himself that affected both his literature and his life. So much so that he chose to take his own life at an early age. In the so-called enfant terrible of Japanese literature, we can find nihilistic and hopeless tones, typical of the Buraiha, as well as certain evidence of affective deficiencies. Both the sociopolitical situation of the time and his personal relationship with women will be key to understanding the author's literature, thought, and psycho-emotional state. We will take a brief look at his suicide attempts (which will also serve as muses for his novels) to finally focus, first on *The Setting Sun* and then in a little more depth on *No Longer Human*, his last work before his decline. In it, we can observe a conflict and struggle between the role he wants to show and the internal reality of the main character, with the human and nonhuman sides of the protagonist coming into conflict. One of the objectives of this chapter is to show that, apart from the author's (or authors') own characteristics and behavior in general, external factors and the reality in which he (they) is (are) immersed are conditioning factors when it comes to expressing himself freely in novels about characters with suicidal instincts to such an extent that the writer (writers) themselves come to think about suicide for themselves or even commit it. This allows this topic to have a great (and necessary) future of research, being apparently foreign authors because they are from another era, so current and representative for our current history, psychology, literature, and philosophy.

Although it is difficult to develop and explain in depth the work and life of Osamu Dazai, in the following pages, I venture to make a brief approach to them and the whole context of pain, death, and suicide that surround them and which

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today make the author continue to be a fundamental pillar of reference in contemporary Japanese and world literature.

There were four suicide attempts by Dazai before he successfully achieved his goal in the spring of 1948, and there were several reasons why he played with his life from his youth until he put an end to it at the age of almost 39.

We move in a historical context in which the author develops his existence between the rise of Japanese nationalism and the beginning of a period of transition after the end of the World War II, when values of the preceding era become obsolete and are no longer fully useful. At this time, the conception of identity that the Japanese had coined for centuries, and which had been gaining momentum since the nineteenth century until culminating in the twentieth century, fell into a void that would require a reinvention or a new search that would offer them another identity reality. That justification through the State Shintoism of the time and the interpretation of Shinto legends and mythology whereby the emperor was a direct descendant of Amaterasu in turn justified the Japanese population's descent from the gods, thus claiming their superiority over the rest of the population, which ended with Japan's defeat in 1945.

This time of his life and family and personal circumstances surrounding him are reflected throughout his work, culminating in *No Longer Human* (published in 1948 [1973]) and *The Setting Sun* (published in 1947 [2002]), in which we can see Dazai's self-portrait of himself, while constantly playing with the idea of birth and death as the only true facts, of which there is no room for subjective interpretation, because there is no truer fact than birth and death (Wolfe, 1990), because here he plays with the limits of existence where before birth and after death, there is no human consciousness that can interpret it; it can only interpret the interval between them, the vital process.

In his stories and novels, including the two mentioned above, we can perceive a constant lack and demand for the affection of a female figure, a constant dependence on women, perhaps the result of a feeling of rejection that arises when he must move in with his aunt because of his mother's ill health. And, however, much Dazai considered his aunt to be his mother; this lack and, in a way, the rejection of the person who gave him life would haunt him until his last days.

As an author belonging to the school of the decadents or Buraiha, like other great writers such as Sakaguchi Ango, his attitude to life and the reflection of this in his works are shrouded in a nihilistic, individualistic, and self-destructive tone that places him outside the social framework, both as a person and in his literature. Dazai transgresses in his novels the established values, those that ceased to have any kind of value; he is somehow in a dispute with the social values of the moment in which they no longer fit with the new realities. Moreover, the newly emerging postwar society pretends to show a social optimism that the passage to modernization, industrialization, and democracy should generate when the truth is that there is a lack of moral and identity criteria toward the new upstart reality. For this reason, he and his narrative often have an alienated tinge with respect to the current reality. And, speaking of narrative, although in this aspect he is often framed in the personalist novel, in the I-novel (*shishōsetsu*), his novels, especially *The Setting Sun* and

No Longer Human, are often referred to as novels with a certain autobiographical tinge. This tendency should not be confused with the aspect that, as Wolfe (1990) rightly remarks, his novels *have* a certain autobiographical tinge, as it is the case for Michel Beaujour. What Dazai really wants to show is a self-portrait (Wolfe, 1990), that is, in his characters, he is exposing a self-perception of himself and not a real objective self; that self he uses in his work, that first person is a "tool, a diversified rhetorical device situated somewhere between reality and fiction" (Wolfe, 1990, p. 116). Dazai demystifies with his self-portrait, with his impossibility of self-representation, that he was not capable of creating fictional characters beyond his real projection in them. The concept of the self is a literary element that moves between objective reality, his perceived reality, and fiction, and proof of this is the numerous times that—as Carlos Rubio (2021) tells us in the introduction to the Spanish compilation of short stories *Recuerdos* (*Memories*)[1] (Dazai, 2021)—throughout his works, he will tell us in different ways about one of his suicide attempts, where in each story, he will want to highlight a different aspect, and he will want to shed light on a different element; in this way, we know the general fact of the event that really took place but always from the framework that Dazai wants to show us.

In this introduction that I mention, Rubio details all the suicide attempts that Dazai committed until he achieved his triumph. In this way, they can be listed and summarized as follows in order to give a panoramic view of the suicidal tendencies of the author: the first attempt occurs in 1929 as an apology for being born into the wrong social class. At that time, a 20-year-old Dazai, who was flirting with the Communist Party, was faced with the shame of having been born into a family that was well positioned in relation to the lower social classes. So, he tries to commit suicide to apologize for his status as a privileged child. But although Dazai called himself a "peasant's son," this mere play with Japanese communism was not so much out of conviction as, perhaps, because of the people who moved in that circle. However, both the routine of political militancy and his nihilistic tendency made his political ideology a vacuum. Moreover, one of the things that characterized those who belonged to the Buraiha was, precisely, that in the worlds they created, they had no interest in creating or making present a class struggle (Wolfe, 1990). Throughout his life and literary career, what can be seen is an absence of values that motivate post-war misery.

At the end of 1930s, as a university student, he commits his second attempt on his life. The preparation of this suicide included one of the prostitutes in the bar he used to frequent, where both, after taking drugs and barbiturates, threw themselves into the sea, but, to Dazai's sorrow, he survived this new attempt, unlike his companion on the journey of voluntary death. This, moreover, will not be the last time Dazai needs a woman to carry out his suicide.

After being expelled from university for lack of attendance, he sought solace in drink, and in 1935, he proceeded to take his own life voluntarily for the third time,

[1] The book's title is the same as the story that heads it, along with six other stories.

this time with an attempt to hang himself. After this last failed attempt, he suffers from appendicitis, which, when it worsens, is medicated with morphine, and given his background, it comes as no surprise that he ends up becoming addicted to this drug. As a result, Dazai went on a detox retreat to rehabilitate himself from his addictions, and once he recovered, he made a fourth attempt, motivated by his wife's infidelity with one of his best friends.

Finally, in June 1948, three days before his 39th birthday, Dazai threw himself and another woman, a hairdresser, into the Tama River canal, ending his life.

Dazai's life has been erratic and driven by unstable emotions. The artist-intellectual, in terms of Émile Durkheim and his concept of egoistic suicide, withdraws into himself and his thoughts, observes himself, and analyzes himself:

> the individual isolates himself, it is because the ties uniting him […] are slackened or broken, because society is not sufficiently integrated at the points where he is in contact with it. These gaps between one and another individual consciousness, estranging them from each other, are authentic results of the weakening of the social fabric. (2002, pp. 244–245)

In this sense, and following in Durkheim's footsteps (see Chap. 6 in this book), if, as he says, in order for consciousness to perceive something alien to it, it must be affected by it, and if the individual goes so far as to distance himself from his surroundings and isolate and take refuge in himself to the point that consciousness can only think about his own tragedy, Dazai is affected by social, personal, and family circumstances that do not sustain the bonds of which the sociologist speaks. Thus, in that condition of a certain intellectual marginality in which he finds himself with a few other decadents, he raised and promoted this selfish suicide, always silent and never violent. But might not his suicidal attempts have something anomic about them, where voluntary death is brought about as a consequence of crises or changes where desires and passions lack limits and therefore lack purpose? That is, on the one hand, we have a Dazai who does not find himself in his social reality, and on the other hand, the author finds himself in a society that neither frames nor sustains him. Thus, given that the causes of suicide are not pure and isolated, but converge with each other, it is likely that in Dazai's case characteristics of both types of suicide converge (with a preponderance of the egotistical type). So that, faced with the emptiness that the writer feels, he seeks external sensations that enliven him in some way. However, we will see that, especially in the novel of *No Longer Human*, as Alan Wolfe says (1990), Dazai projects a living dead man.

These self-destructive behaviors, his idealization, and fantasy are a constant in his greatest works, for many it will be *The Setting Sun*, but it is worth mentioning with some relevance *No Longer Human* as the last novel before putting an end to his existence.

As we enter *The Setting Sun*, we find ourselves with four fundamental characters, three of whom we can see how Dazai's personality and self-portrait is divided. The novel narrates the decadence of the Japanese aristocracy, in which a good family, due to the ravages of war, is forced to move to a rural landscape on the Izu Peninsula. There we meet Kazuko, who narrates the novel in the first person, a woman who transgresses the moral values of the time, and even family values by wanting a

married man to make her a mother; Naoji, her brother, who returns after participating in the war addicted to opium and with a halo of contempt for the bourgeois class, boasting, in a way, of a certain moral and intellectual superiority, which, nevertheless, ends up enveloping him in a miserable reality of which he does not feel a part. Moreover, we find the point of connection between the two, his mother as a true reflection of the last elegant remnant of the aristocracy. Once again, if we review what has been said, the presence of women in Dazai's novels is obvious, and in this case, the importance of maternal affection as the only point of union between the siblings Kazuko and Naoji is evident and above all because it is present in the lives of both. The fourth character to be highlighted, Uehara, is the exemplification of a writer on the decline who once had some success and who wastes his life between drink and sordid environments.

These three main characters, Kazuko, Naoji, and Uehara, are three forms of the author's alter ego at different moments in his life: Kazuko's nonconformism to the imposition of social values, a young Naoji with aspirations of an artist in a world in which he does not identify himself and Uehara, a writer who squanders his existence in an unpredictable life. This, plus the various allusions to suicide, first Kazuko, who fantasizes about it as an apology for her mistakes, then Naoji, who mentions it in his diary until finally committing it. All of this leaves us with clues, or prepares us not to be surprised when it comes to Dazai's tragic end.

In *No Longer Human*, we are introduced to Oba Yozo who, as soon as he is conscious, finds himself on the margins of a society with which he does not agree, which he does not understand, in which he does not fit. In order to survive, Yozo creates a character to show to the world, and he puts on a mask that allows him to live in a world in which he fears human beings. Thus, both Dazai and Yozo become actors in their own lives, and I am returning here to the original meaning of the Greek term πρόσωπον, the mask that Greek performers put on in shows and that would give rise to the term persona. This mask is encased in a smile, a false smile to be shown to the world so that the world does not see his dark inner self. In this way, Yozo fights and lives in fear that someone will discover his trap. In this struggle for survival in which the character does his best to please others, a metamorphosis takes place in which the protagonist gradually loses the meaning of his actions in life. There is a sense of alienation from everyday human life.

Yozo, whose profession and frustrated vocation is the creation of paintings, sees in them the true nature of his being, what he really hides, a nonhuman being within a reality in which he has nothing to identify with. The identity crisis that envelops the society of the moment is reflected in Yozo. In the same way, Dazai uses his literature to expose the crudest part of himself. In this way, what if the only way for the author-character to make himself real and true is through his art? Through Yozo in this novel, Dazai questions the meaning and concept of society: who is society really, which accepts or does not accept, legitimizes or does not legitimize individual acts? Can a single individual speak for society? And if so, it is because that person is within the social frameworks and games that were established at some

point in time. But Dazai and Yozo feel themselves on the margins, alienated in some way.[2]

In this game where the character is blurred with the author, we see allusions and narrations of their suicide attempts, their constant need for female support and figures due to lack of affection and abandonment, their diversions with different addictions until they find themselves in ruin, and the meaninglessness of the context and social values. Yozo, who at the beginning is presented as a child with a smile, false, yes, but a smile to be able to comply with social demands, undergoes a transformation, a metamorphosis throughout the novel in which he is consumed by grief.

Yozo says at the end of the novel:

> Now I have neither happiness nor unhappiness. Everything passes. That is the one and only thing I have thought resembled a truth in the society of human beings where I have dwelled up to now as in a burning hell. Everything passes. (Dazai, 1973, p. 169)

With this halo of resignation and decadence, Dazai leaves a semi-open ending about what happens to Yozo, but one that is easily interpretable.

In Yozo's birth and his presumable death, his conjectural suicide, Dazai marks for us that one truth in which one is born, in which one dies. Yet, to what is existence, his existence, subject? To a straitjacket of the conditions in which he has to live?

Dazai casts the remains in this novel, this representation of Yozo as a dead man in life who has become dehumanized over the years, who in his desire to understand and want to be human became a nonhuman,[3] using this mask to initially be able to participate in the social fabric until he ends up destroying himself and self-destructing because he does not fit into it or because it leaves him on the sidelines.

In his torment, Dazai, as a dehumanized nihilist, rejects and denies, not only through his own life but also through his works, a reality and apparent values that end up alienating and making individuals unhealthy. Durkheim said, "[e]very disturbance of equilibrium […] is an impulse to voluntary death" (2002, pp. 206–207); crises or the increase of progress break the preset equilibrium. In this sense, the rapid transformation of post-war Japan overturned in society a disturbance in the sense of identity and values that already lacked any sense, as well as an appearance of illusion and positivity, an optimism that in the end remained a mere façade.

How can Dazai be described as a victim of his time and circumstances? We cannot deny that psychosocial and psycho-emotional realities have violated and continue to violate the stability of authors, in this case the transitional period that Japan was facing in the middle of the twentieth century. The lack of affection and the

[2] In this sense, we can recall Durkheim and the suicidogenic conditions that alter the individual even, from the perspective of selfish suicide, the threads that weave society have left Dazai (and Yozo) out, and although the artist-intellectual has the tendency to turn in on himself and his thoughts, the fact that the interweaving of society makes them feel on the margins makes them feel vulnerable and encourages self-absorption for themselves and an alienation for what is external and outside of them.

[3] Character transformation analysis of Yozo's metamorphic passage from the human to the nonhuman, mentioned by Printziou (2017) through a quotation from Y. Hijiya.

irrepressible need to seek it in the hands of women who in his novels are shown with maternal attitudes (Kazuko and Naoji's own mother or Yozo's wife) plus the historical moment he was going through—with all that this entailed on a social and cultural level—ended up leaving him outside the world, making his works (not free of a certain sarcasm) his most real expression of what he had inside; just as Yozo saw his own nature through his paintings, Dazai brought his own nature to light through his novels, in which we can glimpse periods that are darker than others. What is certain is that the period surrounding *No Longer Human* is the darkest period through which he eventually realized and completed his suicide.

Dazai was a model to be followed in literature and culturally. He is considered to be one of the most prominent artists of his era, and even today, his legacy is still valid to the point of belonging to the world of pop culture, transferring his work and figure to manga and anime. But, beyond his recognized image as the enfant terrible and icon of Japanese literature, what leads us to reflect on is how mental health places authors (which is what concerns us in this book) in a vital and literary position and how necessary it is to continue studying and unravelling their lives and works in order to materialize the critique toward social, intellectual, and cultural well-being in order to unravel all the issues that they bring to our attention and that we often find difficult to recognize because they can put us in an uncomfortable position of awareness of the reality that surrounds us.[4]

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Chapter 19
The Catastrophe of the Self: The Case of Unica Zürn

Leonor Saro García

In 1970, Unica Zürn, artist and writer of short stories, novels, and anagrammatic poetry, committed suicide by jumping off the window of her Paris apartment with her lifetime companion Hans Bellmer as witness. Born in Berlin in 1916 and associated with the Surrealist movement, Zürn foreshadowed an almost identical scene in her novel *Dunkler Frühling* (*Dark Spring*), an autobiographical coming-of-age story about the experience of loss and the discovery of sex and pleasure in suffering. Since 1957, she was frequently hospitalized in several psychiatric centers due to her constant schizophrenic crises. The origin of her illness and her tragic end is to be found in her work, devoted to the expansion and exploration of her internal universe through automatism and dissociation, an inquiry that necessarily involves the abandonment of consciousness and will and the destruction of the limits imposed by the external world and that inevitably leads to delirium and the disintegration of the self. The life and work of Unica Zürn are defined by two contradictory forces: the nostalgia of unity, which is only possible in pure love or in death (or in death for love), and an impulse of abandonment, of inaction, of collapse, and dispersion that manifests itself in ecstasy, in fantasy, and in the fragile spaces of desire.

1 Biography

Unica Zürn was a German surrealist artist and author of anagrammatic poems, automatic drawings, and introspective novels halfway between fiction, diary, and oneiric fantasy. Her work had little impact during her lifetime, except among the French surrealist circle with which she used to mingle. Her complete works were

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republished in Germany (1988–2001) in an eight-volume edition that comprehended her literary work, her correspondence, and a large part of her drawings. From the 1980s onward, literary critics began to take an interest in Zürn's work, which has been much more warmly received in France and recently in Spain than in her native country.

Unica Zürn was born in Berlin in 1916 into a wealthy family. Her childhood, full of joy and splendor, is followed by a period of suffering, due to the rape committed by her own brother and the divorce of her parents, who lived in the same house with their respective lovers, neglecting the attention and care of their children. Fascinated by an idolized but absent father and deeply disappointed by a disaffected mother, who she perceived early on as a monstrous and obscene creature, Zürn evokes her childhood throughout her life as a lost paradise, marked by trauma, deprivation, and abuse. Due to the decline of the family's economic situation, Unica is forced to give up her studies, and at the age of 16, she starts working as a scriptwriter and editor at the film production company UFA. In 1942, she marries Erich Laupenmühlen, with whom she has two children, Christian and Katrin. After their divorce, the children are left in custody of their father due to Unica's mental illness, which begins to show its early symptoms. Unica makes a living writing stories for several newspapers. Between 1949 and 1955, she publishes about 100 texts, strongly influenced by post-war German Surrealism in Berlin.

An heir of the spirit of Novalis and Schlegel's Romanticism, German Surrealism seeks the rupture of the principle of causality blending artistic media and literary genres. It aims to transform the determined into the unspecified by fluctuating forms, breaking the limits to build an imagined habitable space, settled on the ruins of the city and the individual.

In 1953, she meets Hans Bellmer, a photographer attached to French Surrealism who will be her companion until the end of her days, and he introduces her to Henri Michaux, Man Ray, Max Ernst, Dorothea Tanning, and Gaston Bachelard, among others. Bellmer initiates her in the practice of automatic drawing and anagrammatic poetry, to which she will devote herself intensely and obsessively throughout her life.

In 1957, she suffers her first psychotic crisis that coincides with an encounter with Henry Michaux, who she identifies with one of her first childhood visions, the man of Jasmine, a paralytic blue-eyed figure she ends up marrying in her childhood fantasy and who represents her ideal of passive, distant, and absent love. She turns the man of Jasmine into a magical alter ego, attributing him decisions, faculties, and limitations that actually belong to her. The man of Jasmine also represents her need to live in delirium, a hallucinatory state in which everything can happen, where miracles are possible. Unica pursues this and considers it the best version of herself. That same year, her depressive state gets worse, and she is hospitalized in the asylum of Wittenau, where she begins to work on the manuscript of *Der Mann im Jasmin* (*The Man of Jasmine*), a sort of symbolic diary in which Unica narrates her mental illness through a metaphorical universe built since she was a child and which she inhabits more intensely than the outside world. In this inner reality, the present unfolds in all its potential and is neither settled on nor limited by any decision; all

opposites converge and reconcile, and the categories of reason that order external reality lose here their strength.

Unica seeks hallucination. Delirium is equivalent to blindly believing in the miracle. Madness is a waiting state, and only in waiting an encounter with the extraordinary is possible. The problem is that this hallucinatory phase, which Unica feels as a gift that gives her access to a world that no one else knows, is followed by a depressive one that incapacitates her and plunges her into abulia and disappointment. Over time, the depressive phases become comparatively much longer than the delusional stages. In her work *Der Mann im Jasmin*, she writes about herself: "It is not clear to her whether she hallucinates. In the state she is in, the most unbelievable and unseen things become true. Thus, when images appear to her in the night sky, these images are really there" (Zürn, 1991, p. 146).

Unica desires the impossible, and, in delirium, the impossible is given to her through pain and extreme pleasure, in whose conjunction lies the inherent contradiction of human condition. Unica goes through the limits of material reality, to reach a state of mystical ecstasy that is only definitively attained in death: a state in which the subject is released from the boundaries that delimit its individual identity, the most chimerical images acquire corporeal forms, and all desires are satisfied. In *Der Mann im Jasmin*, she relates how her doctor in the psychiatry ward identifies desire as the cause of her madness: "—Wishing is forbidden—says in this house Doctor Mortimer to her. —Wishing is bad for your health. I forbid it. The fairy tale about the fulfillment of the last wish is nothing but a fairy tale" (Zürn, 1991, p. 141).

In 1970, Zürn commits suicide by throwing herself from the window of her apartment in Paris, in the presence of her companion Hans Bellmer, who, paralyzed by a stroke—as the living image of her man of Jasmine—helplessly witnesses the fulfillment of an event that had been symbolically invoked and foretold in fiction.

2 Hallucination as a Miracle: The Linguistic Dwelling

Unica Zürn's work is marked by the confrontation between her inner world and external reality. At the beginning of *Der Mann im Jasmin*, Zürn describes a childhood dream that, as in Carroll's tale, leads her behind her room's mirror to a different world, entirely of her own. After awakening from this dream, the girl discovers that there is no door behind the mirror, and suddenly, she feels very alone. Then she runs to her mother's room, "in order, if possible, to return to the place from which she came, to see nothing more" (Zürn, 1991, p. 137). Zürn seeks for an orienting reference in her mother to navigate a world she does not understand. She tries to cling to a refuge, to return to that protected, unconscious, hidden, and undifferentiated existence, free of all desire and therefore free of every lack, prior to the trauma of birth.

According to the philosopher Hans Blumenberg (1989), every individual existence begins with a traumatic separation, since at birth, we are torn away from the protection of our mother's womb and begin to exist that means to be outside the

mother's existence, exposed to the outside world. Thus, as the world appears as something alien and external to ourselves, the individual identity emerges. As this fundamental differentiation becomes clearer, the awareness of human contingency and of the situation of exposure and radical helplessness in which we find ourselves in face of the world also increases. As soon as we human beings become aware of ourselves and begin to think of the world as something other than ourselves, we realize that we are immersed in a world that we can neither understand nor control and yet determine the conditions of our own existence.

Precisely, because of this conscious condition, man is, in Georg Simmel's words, the neediest, the most defenseless, the most helpless of all creatures, because he is confronted not only with the disproportion between the forces of the universe and his own forces but also with the excess of his own pretensions in the world compared with the unsuitability of his own capacities. This is how Georg Simmel defines it: "Man is the hungry being par excellence. The animal is full when it has eaten" (1923, p. 14). Human desire projects itself far beyond the limits of what we see and understand and is therefore condemned to perennial dissatisfaction, because its expectations are beyond the reach of our dispositions.

In its transition to individual life, the child moves between the drive for autonomy and the regressive search for protection and stability in parental figures. Through his images and representations, the human being imaginatively constructs an inner world that allows him to regulate his own life according to his own dispositions. Although the human being cannot pretend to be at the height of a world that is alien to him and which he cannot dispose of, because "the absolute power of reality is equivalent to the absolute powerlessness of man" (Wetz, 1993, p. 87), he can keep it at a distance, substituting a more familiar and livable representation of reality for the ruthlessness of nature. Through imagination (*Einbildungskraft*), we construct an internal universe of symbols "ordered, available and familiar" (Wetz, 1993, p. 85) that suits our purposes, and we neutralize what oppresses us and relieve the anguish of uncertainty. This construction of symbols and images responds to the need to appease the uncertainty of the human being facing an inconsistent and contradictory reality and to recover a position of control and visibility in it.

Unica builds this symbolic and imaginative world very early, as a way of trying to understand a reality that is shown to her straight out too soon. Unica responds to the absence of her parents by idealizing the father and demonizing the mother: in this way, the masculine is presented to her as the image of self-sufficiency:

> She senses the attraction emanating from those who remain distant and mysterious. This ist he first lesson she learns. He brings his friends home and they call her 'princess'. They toss her up in the air and she, fully confident in whatever males do, feels herselft caught at the last second before a terrible fall. In her eyes the male is a great magician, a creature able to accomplish anything, no matter how impossible. (Zürn, 2000, pp. 36–37)

As Lotta Zipp explains (2019), Zürn's work reflects the failure of the process of separation and individuation required for the construction of self-identity, which

> is even more difficult in the case of women, inasmuch as the building of the female subject implies on the one hand the identification of the daughter with the mother's femininity and the simultaneous development of a female identity separate from the mother.

During Unica's childhood, the mother is conspicuous by her absence. She leads an apparently idle life, relegates the education of her children to a governess, and seems to have time for everything but for taking care of her children. The maternal mirroring, which provides a context for children to notice the effect of their actions on others and is indispensable for the development of their own identity, is thus not given.

As a result, Unica Zürn develops an insuperable and intense aversion to the feminine, a reflection of her mother, but also of herself. The female sex is represented to her as a wound, as a void to be filled: her own body, her own identity as a woman is perceived as incomplete, as imperfect. This is pointed out by the critic Ute Baumgärtel in his dissertation on Zürn's anagrams (1999, pp. 37–38):

> The person, however, is described with deficient, deficient attributes of failure and lack, with the characteristics of an eternal victim, whose way out and hopelessness make the productive moment of the artistic work appear as a last rescue action, as a stopgap. It is the character image of an "unfinished" woman who oscillates back and forward in her shimmering fantasies, who is incapable of taking a stand, who suffers for reality and eclipses her life with regressive fantasies.

In *Dünkler Frühling* (*Dark Spring*) (2000), Zürn observes the cross formed by the beams of her window that represents for her the crossing between the two poles, the conciliation of two opposites: the vertical line is the man, the horizontal line is the woman, and the point where they meet, the mystery of the encounter. Unica's traumatic discovery of sex, the perception of her own body as incomplete and wounded, is elaborated through a personal symbol that will remain forever indelibly engraved in her way of understanding the world.

In the same way, in Unica's imaginary, the numbers nine and six represent death and life, respectively (1991). The nine looks to the left, faces the unforeseen, ready to receive it. The nine is the wait, the faith in the event. The six, on the contrary, turns its back to the unforeseen, withdraws into itself. Together, they form the symbol of yin and yang, the union of opposites, but also the sexual posture in which Unica once discovers her mother, who then appears to her as a gigantic and monstrous spider. Likewise, placed inversely, they draw a heart: the contradiction, the paradox, the irresolvable tension between waiting and renunciation, between body and spirit, between health and illness, which constitute the core of the human soul. Before learning the shared meaning of symbols, Unica attributes to them a meaning of her own, which far from distancing and neutralizing those realities that overwhelm her and that she does not understand, and contributes to overdetermine and overdimension their mystery in the imagination.

3 The Literalness of the Sign

It is difficult to distinguish the symbolic and constructed images of Unica Zürn's universe from her own hallucinations. In fact, we could say that the only difference between a delusion and a metaphor is the power they have over one's own life, the

force with which we cling to the image to sustain our existence. Zürn gives an absolute value to the images through which she traces the story of her own life: the image achieves the value of a command, a design, a dogma of faith. "Deliria sind Gebete" ["Deliria are prayers"] (1991, p. 243), says a verse from one of her anagrams. Like prayers, Zürn's delusions, which coincide with the symbolic images that recur throughout her work, are constructions of her own desire, meaningful configurations that are projected onto reality in the hope of their fulfilment. Although there are indeed clear equivalences between her work and her life, this is not a typical case of autobiographical writing: in Zürn, literature is not a reflection of life. On the contrary, her life is the fulfilment, the material realization of what Unica imagines and constructs within herself. In the words of Ruth Henry, Unica has "not written a line that she did not fulfill in character, image or de facto with her life" (1984, p. 38).

Thus, the images in Zürn's work lose to some extent their symbolic character because they are often lived and taken in their literal sense. When Unica meets Henri Michaux, she immediately identifies him with the figure of the man of Jasmine who has been with her since she was a child. This is not a figurative association: Michaux is literally the man of Jasmine. Moreover, the poet was born in the year 1899, and Zürn finds in the appearance of number nine the omen of all miracles:

> I have spent most of my life asleep, the next most part waiting for the miracle, meditating on the unreachable. I have devoted a very small part of my time seems to certain activities that are no different from those of other people. A childhood that on the outside was interrupted in just a few hours, on the inside keeps unfolding. How often I have wished that my son were my father, and my daughter were my mother. Very often. But I cannot achieve it. Not with my waiting, with this crazy hope that the miracle will happen. The miracle that I cannot describe. The miracle to which these pages are dedicated. I will have to pay for this miracle. The appearance of its contempt and its grace will have a price. Its existence will be brief, like all wonderful things. To experience it, I may have to pay for it with my life. This month I discovered what my lucky number is, 99. It makes me more and more convinced that the miracle is coming; the miracle, the next step of which will be death. What a beautiful, pathetic dreaming! The 100 is childlike. If you can count to 100, you can do something. 99 is like taking a breath – no, even better – it's like ceasing to breath. One doesn't know what will come next: will the door open at once? Will the curtain disappear? Will fear and beauty make its entrance? And in what form? (1988, pp. 55–56)

Unica surrenders herself completely to the tyranny of her own metaphors, over which she has not—and nor wants to—have any control. The image is the happening, the appearance of something miraculous and extraordinary that might well not reveal itself, and yet she can see with her own eyes in those moments of madness in which, as in childhood, the possible, the potentially real, the infinite, the indeterminate, the irrational replace the constrained and limited factual reality. For Unica, wanting to be healed means the renounce of the miracle, the withdrawal from the faith that supports her whole life. In her work *Das Haus der Krankheiten* (*The House of Illnesses*) (1986, p. 65) she writes:

> Since yesterday I know why I am writing this book: to stay sick a little longer. Every day I can lay out new blank pages to be written and so, while I wait, I remain ill, but, just as before, the hunter is chasing me. Now he has set the traps of obligation and consideration.

> I fall into them constantly and so, little by little, I break in two. My 'better half', being clever and wise, wants me to stay ill a little longer, because it knows what can be achieved with an illness like the one I have. My 'worse half' wants me to go back, to accomplish the few duties I have, because it's time to be a little thoughtful with my environment, which anyway is not very wide.

4 Anagrammatic Writing

The discovery of anagrammatic poetry marked a turning point in Zürn's work. The process is as follows: starting from a sentence, which can be anything—from a Bible verse to an advertising slogan—a poem is created. Each line must consist of all the letters that make up the original phrase, no more, no less. And the poem ends when no more possible combinations can be found. This constricting and even castrating form of writing becomes for Unica a daily exercise of self-knowledge, but also a kind of oracle. In the words of Hans Bellmer in the foreword to Zürn's work *Hexentexten* (*Witch Texts*) (1986, pp. 118–119):

> Anagrams are words and phrases created by rearranging the letters of a given word or phrase. […] We do not know much about the birth and the anatomy of the 'image'. Obviously, the man knows his language even less than he knows his body. The sentence, too, is like a body that invites us to dissect it. Thus, in an endless series of anagrams, each new line is revealed by itself […] Chance seems to have a great part in the solution. Without it no linguistic reality would be real, because only at the end it becomes surprisingly clear that this result was necessary, that it could not have been any other. – Anyone who writes anagrams on a daily basis, will have an exact poetic weather report of his own self at the end of the year.

Unica does not understand anagrammatic writing as a form of creation, but as a way of searching for the extraordinary. Within a given phrase, with a given meaning, and a given signifier, it is possible to find many other semiotic combinations that are not made up by the author but found. Language is broken down into its minimal components and restructured to compose different meanings and signifiers. In each new verse, the same components are repeated, but in a completely different way: thus, the unique becomes multiple, the homogeneous diverse. As Helga Lutz points out (2003), repetition in Zürn's language does not serve to delimit and fix the contours of the world but expresses that the forms and contents of reality are never identical to themselves, that they are in a process of permanent change. Through a rigorous and incredibly restrictive exercise, Unica neatly systematizes the arbitrariness of reality and the precariousness of the rational structures by which we try to understand it. By destabilizing the structures of language, which is the most elementary human tool of order and mediation, Zürn highlights the fragility of the links and connections we rely on to have or, rather, to pretend to have some control over our own existence.

The anagram is produced in the tension between the creative will of the artist and the elimination of premeditated creative intention, and the result seems to obey an external will, much more than one's own consciousness. In anagrammatic writing,

the artist is no more than a medium, a passive receptacle. In this way, the anagram acquires a certain mystical sense: the artist empties himself of the contents of his consciousness and places his gaze at the service of the discovery of what is hidden in the word. But in this exercise, language also empties itself of its own contents and becomes a formless matter in such a way that it is the artist's self, an unconscious self, freed from the boundaries of rationalization, a self that is almost other, that projects its contents onto it as on a blank screen.

5 Identity and Suicide

Therefore, language loses its guarantees of safety. The boundaries between representation and the represented object are diluted, their bond weakened, and, with it, the identity of the poetic self is also blurred. Unica writes about herself in the third person: she stares at her own actions, past and present, as if they had happened to someone else, with the gaze of another, estrange and alienated from her own experience, but at the same time inevitably determined by it. Her memories define the way she looks at the world, the interpretation of what she observes and imagines, and the decisions she makes. As Carola Hilmes explains (2002), in Zürn's work is not the author herself who speaks, nor the first-person narrator. It is rather an external voice that is attributed to her and speaks within her. The subject reneges on himself and speaks with an inner voice, without external references, building a self-referential and self-evident poetic universe.

In *The Man of Jasmine*, Unica narrates a walk-through Berlin, always in the third person, as if she looked at it from the outside. She is heading for a specific place, but she can't remember the way. Suddenly she hears a high-pitched sound in her head: it is the call of the man of Jasmine directing her steps and leading her to her destination. Unica not only narrates from the outside but attributes her own movements to an alien will, which is the fruit of her own creation, but which is beyond her control, and which also possesses a body of its own, a material body that Unica has assigned to it. The man of Jasmine is not just an idea: he is embodied in the poet Henri Michaux who is thousands of miles away from her, and yet is part of Unica herself. The two fit together like Russian dolls or, in her own words, like a sarcophagus within a sarcophagus:

> She writes the manuscript: *A game for two.* The game of the expansion – (because she saw him for the first time in his room in the incredible height of three meters). The game of conveyance- (because she feels that he conveys in her to destroy her again in himself – to invalidate their encounter). The game of harmony – (because while she falls asleep, he stretches out and gets comfortable in her body, and they rest together – like a sarcophagus within the other. When they open their eyes in the morning, he slips away immediately). (Zürn, 1991, p. 142)

When Zürn speaks of herself, she presents herself as a woman without attributes, with the traits of an eternal victim, passive and patient, who is only herself in waiting and, when she creates, is only a receptacle for the miraculous. Unica presents

herself as an unfinished woman, as a body in pieces, as a set of images that never cease to mutate and that desperately seek to mean something, to be relevant. This is, however, one of the many images of her person that Unica pours into her texts: an empty, malleable, plastic Unica, ready to transform herself into many others, like the starting verse of an anagram.

Unica's final decision to end her life is not an act of despair, nor of self-determination: it is the complete emptying of herself, the possibility of redemption, the return to the beautiful lair where fantasy wears the crown. The complete surrender to the secret of the world that she has barely glimpsed in life, the sublimation of those two attributes that condense her ideal of love: distance and passivity. As her friend Ruth Henry points out in her biography (2007), faced with the choice of failing in real life or being forever imprisoned in a permanent flight into delusion, Unica chose the only free act she was capable of: transcending her own existence. Using her own words (Zürn, 1988, p. 59):

> Just as life is coming to an end, I am again surrounded by warnings as clear as those of my childhood days. It is my old sensibility, saved, like a beautiful angel, from the heaps of rubble. I grow old. Old age and childhood begin to resemble each other. I have never been young. I am an old child. Only when we reach adulthood, we forget, from time to time, like so many other important things, what we knew in childhood. I will not become an adult before death comes to me. What an undeserved bliss!

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Part III
Suicide in Contemporary Writers Understood Through Their Literary Styles, Their Writing Techniques, and Their Metaphorical Language

Chapter 20
Sylvia Plath: Suicidal Tendencies in Life, Poems, and Fiction

David Lester

Sylvia Plath, born in the United States but who died by suicide in England, left a body of work that illuminates some of the motivations for her choice. Her novel *The Bell Jar* is semi-autobiographical and covers the period as an undergraduate when she was hospitalized and given electroconvulsive "therapy." Her poems are personal and intense and provide insights into her choice, as well as showing that insight alone was not enough to prevent her suicide. This chapter will examine Plath's writings and describe the motivations that resulted in her death by suicide.

After I read her novel *The Bell Jar* (1971), I became fascinated by Sylvia Plath, and I have often studied her writings to look for clues for her choice to die by suicide.[1] At one conference, a close friend of mine, Brian Barraclough, a psychiatrist, said, "David, if lithium had been available, she would not have died by suicide." It is true that Sylvia would now be diagnosed as having a bipolar disorder, but that does lessen the importance and relevance of the psychodynamics at work in her life, and it is those psychodynamic processes that I will focus on in this chapter.[2]

[1] I edited a special issue of *Death Studies* devoted to her life and death (Lester, 1998a).

[2] As a scholar, I should refer to Sylvia as "Plath" throughout this chapter, but "Plath" is too impersonal for me to use.

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1 Introduction

The life of the American poet Sylvia Plath has fascinated biographers, feminists, and psychologists in the years since her suicide in 1963 in London.[3] Biographers have perhaps been captivated by the premature death of this potentially leading poet and novelist of the latter part of the twentieth century. Feminists have been stirred by the complex relationship that Sylvia had with her parents and her husband, Ted Hughes, an English poet (see Chap. 2 in this book). Sylvia's suicide was precipitated in part by Hughes falling in love with another woman and leaving Plath, but later, this woman too died by suicide, casting Hughes as a Harlequin figure who leads women into both love and death.[4] Psychologists have been interested in Plath because her poems and novel give clues to the psychodynamic forces driving her life and her decision to kill herself.[5]

2 Sylvia's Life in Brief

2.1 Early Life in America

Sylvia was born on October 27, 1932, in Massachusetts, with a brother (Warren) coming two and a half years later. Her father, Otto, was a professor at Boston University specializing in the study of bees. Otto died on November 5, 1940, of untreated diabetes, eight days after Sylvia's birthday. Sylvia's mother then moved the family to Wellesley, Massachusetts. Otto was extremely proud of Sylvia and taught her the Latin names of insects which he then had her demonstrate to visitors.

Sylvia's first poem appeared in the Boston *Sunday Herald* in 1941 when she was eight. She won many prizes for her poems and her drawings, and her IQ was roughly 160. In high school, she edited the school magazine and had poems published in *Seventeen* and the *Christian Science Monitor*. She graduated first in her class and was awarded a scholarship to Smith College. At college, she worked hard and often became fatigued and depressed. Her writing continued to be published, but like all writers, her work was often rejected, which led her to question her ability and to become depressed. She was seriously depressed in her junior year and had thoughts

[3] Sugars (1999) has discussed the fascination of scholars with Sylvia Plath and how they use her life and writings to advance their own scholarly agenda.

[4] I was, at times in the past, angry at Ted Hughes for his role in Sylvia's death until I realized that scores of marriages break up and the participants do not choose to die by suicide. Ted Hughes was overcome with grief and self-blame and told Sylvia's mother that he never wanted to be forgiven (Lester, 2008).

[5] There are also collections of Sylvia's diaries (Plath & Kukil, 2000), letters (Plath & Plath, 1975), and short stories (Plath, 1979).

of suicide, but she continued to work hard and was awarded a summer internship at *Mademoiselle* for the summer of 1953.

Sylvia came home depressed by the experience and then was rejected for a course on creative writing at Harvard University. She cut herself, and her mother locked up her own sleeping pills. Sylvia went to a psychiatrist who recommended electroconvulsive shock, which seemed to make Sylvia's condition worse and resulted in chronic insomnia. In August 1953, she took 40 sleeping pills and hid in the basement. Her grandmother found her 2 days later. She was eventually placed in Maclean Hospital, where she was given insulin shock therapy, chlorpromazine, and more electroconvulsive shock.[6] She was diagnosed with "adolescent nervous illness" by one psychiatrist and acute schizophrenia by another. By December, Sylvia's depression had lessened, and she returned home and then back to Smith College. These experiences form the basis for her novel *The Bell Jar* written in 1961–1962.

At this time, Sylvia confided to a friend that she had cut her throat when she was ten, and she did have a scar on her throat. She also said that she both loved and despised her father and had wished him dead many times. Sylvia's mother also ascertained that depression was common in her husband's family, affecting many family members. Sylvia graduated in June 1955 and was awarded a Fulbright scholarship to study in England.

2.2 Life in England

Sylvia spent two years at Newnham College at Cambridge University, one of the two colleges for women then out of the 20 colleges, and she graduated with a BA. Sylvia met Ted Hughes, an English poet, in February 1956, and they married in June. Sylvia worked hard on submitting both her work and Ted's, and his first collection of poems was published in 1957. They spent two years in the United States, with Sylvia teaching and Ted obtaining a Guggenheim fellowship. Ted was unhappy with America, and they returned to England December 1959.

Initially, they lived in London, and Sylvia gave birth to Frieda in April 1960. Then they moved to Devon, where Sylvia gave birth to Nicholas in January 1962.[7] Their literary careers prospered. Sylvia had a book of poems published in 1960, and both won prizes. Sylvia then won a Saxton Fellowship to write *The Bell Jar*.

By the summer of 1962, Ted had met and fell in love with Assia Gutman, and Ted left Sylvia in July 1962.[8] Sylvia moved to London in December, raising the two

[6] It should be noted that, in the 1950s, electroconvulsive shock was given to both hemispheres and with a strong current, often resulting in severe permanent loss. In retrospect, it was a barbaric treatment.

[7] Ted later admitted that he had not wanted to have children.

[8] When they met and in their early years together, Ted was the more well-known poet but, over time, Sylvia was becoming more well known. It may be that Ted was jealous of Sylvia's success and sought a less threatening partner in Assia.

children, writing furiously, and hoping that Ted would return to her. Reading the poems written during this period, it would seem that she was in a manic phase. Her poems, as we shall see, are powerfully personal, but critics find them not crafted well.

In the last week of her life (February 4–11, 1963), Sylvia had a fever, had wildly fluctuating moods, and fired her au-pair girl. The weather was cold, and pipes froze.[9] Her psychiatrist tried to find her a hospital bed, but the hospitals were full or unsuitable. On the night of the 10th, Sylvia opened the windows in her children's bedroom and put milk and bread and butter by their beds. She then put her head in the gas oven in the kitchen after sealing the door. Her doctor had sent a nurse over at 9 am, but the nurse could not get in and went away to check the address. She returned to see the two children crying at a window, and she found a workman to help her break in. Sylvia was pronounced dead at 10:30 am.

In the 1960s, domestic gas in England (and around the world) was coal gas, which is very toxic. Later, countries switched to natural gas, which does not contain carbon monoxide, and so death takes a longer time. Twenty years later, Sylvia might have survived, but she also might have chosen a different method for her suicide. Sylvia might also have survived had the nurse broken into her apartment at 9 am.

2.3 Thoughts on Sylvia's Life

Even in these brief details, there are so many themes, beginning with the possibility of a genetically based depressive disorder. Not only did depression run in the family of Sylvia's father, but her son Warren later died by suicide at the age of 47. He was a Professor of Ocean Sciences at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks, unmarried and with no children. He had experienced depression and had left the university to focus on pottery.

Sylvia was very attached to her father, who died when she was eight. In a sample of psychiatric patients, Lester and Beck (1976) found that early loss was common in those who later die by suicide, especially if they suffer a later loss. Having lost her father at an early age, Sylvia was now faced with the loss of Ted Hughes. In a sample of 30 famous individuals who died by suicide, I (1989b) found that half had experienced the early loss of a parent.

Gerisch (1998), a psychoanalyst, noted: a) Sylvia's traumatized relationship with her mother, caused in part by her mother's devotion to her duties toward her husband and to the mother devoting more care and attention to Sylvia's sickly younger brother; b) Sylvia's disappointing relationship with her distant father, who then died when Sylvia was eight; c) these impeded the development of her own identity separate from those of her parents; and d) repeated unsuccessful attempts to achieve a mature female identity (as shown also in the character Esther in *The Bell Jar*).

[9] In England in those days, it was customary to have some water pipes on the outside of houses.

Shulman (1998) notes the oft-cited unresolved grief over her father's death and her symbiotic attachment to her mother, but he noted the many stressors in Sylvia's life, including her husband's infidelity in 1958 and later in 1962.[10] Shulman also noted Sylvia's perfectionism (and the accompanying self-hate), grandiosity and fragile self-esteem, and narcissism.

However, the most important clues to the psychodynamics of Sylvia's choice to die by suicide comes from her writings, both her poems and her novel. Let us look first at the poems.

3 Sylvia Plath's Poems

Sylvia's poems are startling in their impact on the reader. The woman who had been subjected to electroconvulsive shock wrote in 1960: "By the roots of my hair some god got hold of me/I sizzled in his blue volts like a desert prophet" (1992, p. 141). Her poems, especially those written toward the end of her life and published posthumously, provide the best insight into her mind. Hoyle (1968, p. 192) noted that her poem *Cut* (written in 1962) reads like a brief manic attack, starting off slowly in pace ("What a thrill/My thumb instead of an onion./The top quite gone" [Plath, 1992, p. 235]) but then speeds up ("A million soldiers run,/Redcoats every one" [Plath, 1992, p. 235]), before ending at a slow pace ("Dirty girl, thumb stump" [Plath, 1992, p. 236]).[11]

She refers to her suicidal behavior in *Lady Lazarus* (1992, written in 1962): "I have done it again./One year in every ten/I manage it-/Dying/Is an art, like everything else./I do it exceptionally well" (pp. 244–245). In that poem, she mentions that her first attempt was at the age of ten, an accident, but the second attempt was serious. She meant to die.

But it is in *Daddy* (1992, written in 1962) that she spells out the motives behind her choice of suicide.[12] She says, "Daddy, I have had to kill you./You died before I had time" (Plath, 1992, p. 222), and she expresses her anger at him, comparing him to a Nazi torturer and herself a Jew being taken to Auschwitz. He is a fascist, a devil who bit her pretty red heart in two, but she is also scared of him. She says that "At twenty I tried to die/And get back, back, back to you" (Plath, 1992, p. 224). Her motive for suicide was to be re-united with her father, the father she is angry at. Her solution was to marry a substitute. "I made a model of you/A man in black with a Meinkampf look/And a love of the rack and the screw/And I said, I do I do" (Plath, 1992, p. 224). She married Ted Hughes who indeed did torture her (psychologically).

[10] Sylvia also had a car crash in June 1962 that may have been a suicide attempt.

[11] Hoyle (1968) is obsessed with Sylvia's mania, even calling her two previous suicide attempts (described in *Lady Lazarus*) as manic-depressive attacks!

[12] Schwartz (2017) has also discussed the impact of the absence of a father (both physically and emotionally) on a daughter.

She says that she has killed two men, including the vampire "who said he was you" (Plath, 1992, p. 224). She feels that she killed her father. Perhaps, as a child, frustrated with her father, she thought or said, "I wish you were dead" (Plath, 1992, p. 224), and then he died. Children may not have a mature concept of what death is, and they may not be able to distinguish between wishes and deeds. They may think, magically, that a wish can cause the result. But how has she killed Ted Hughes? In the year before her death, Sylvia was becoming more famous and viewed as a better poet. Hughes may have felt threatened by her success, and his "death" by Sylvia may have been psychological, a destruction of his self-confidence.

At the end of the poem, Sylvia tells her father to lie back now. He is sitting up in his grave, apparently wondering where Sylvia is. She is coming back to him, finally, so he can relax. In the last line of the poem, she beautifully expresses her ambivalence toward her father. "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through" (Plath, 1992, p. 224). *Daddy* is a term of affection; *bastard* a term of hate.[13] Despite the anger at her father, Sylvia began to keep bees in England, and she studied German, both signs of identification with her father.

From what does this anger derive? Otto Plath seems to have been proud of Sylvia, but perhaps, his pride was because Sylvia's knowledge of the Latin names for insects was a reflection of his ability. In her poem, *The Beekeeper's Daughter*, Sylvia tells us how her father is much more interested in his bees than in his daughter: "My heart under your foot, sister of a stone" (1992, p. 118). Otto Plath perhaps was more concerned with his needs and desires than those of Sylvia.[14]

3.1 Research on Sylvia's Poems

I have also looked at Sylvia's poems from an objective and quantitative point of view. Piotrowski (1974) develop a system for understanding people's responses to the Rorschach ink-blot test ("What do you see in this ink blot?"). The use of the words dark, night, and black indicated that the person was very likely to "act out," that is, behave impulsively driven by their conscious and unconscious desires. Sylvia's poem *Daddy*, written a few months before her suicide, contains the word "black" six times. In her collection of 40 poems written between 1957 and 1962, Sylvia used the word "black" 20 times and "dark" six times, an average of 0.65 per poem. I argued, therefore, that the poem *Daddy* seems to portend acting-out behavior (Lester, 1989a, see also Chap. 23 in this book).[15]

[13] Apparently, self-insight is not always helpful, contrary to what psychoanalysts would have us believe.

[14] Others have speculated about Sylvia's relationship with her mother and the inadequacies of the relationship. For example, Kloss (1987) saw the poem *Mirror* as indicating the problems in this relationship.

[15] Hunter (2005) focused on Sylvia's use of the word "black" to describe men, as in her poems *Man in Black*, *Daddy*, and *The Bee Meeting*, suggesting demonic masculinity.

James Pennebaker has devised a computer program to count types of words contained in texts, usually as percentages, such as positive emotions, negative emotions, sad words, angry words, and words connected with death. I compared the words in Sylvia's poems written in 1962 (57 poems) with the words in the poems written in 1963 (12 poems). The poems written in 1963 in the 40 days prior to her suicide had fewer words but longer sentences. These last few poems had more unique words and fewer common dictionary words. There were fewer references to herself (I, me) and to others (you), fewer words reflecting causation (because, hence), fewer refences to people and social processes (talk, friends). In the 69 poems written in the 12 months prior to her suicide, these trends were also found and, in addition, an increase in positive emotions (Lester & McSwain, 2011). This latter finding is surprising, but it confirms the results of an analysis of a diary written by a young woman who died by suicide that covered the final year of her life (Pennebaker & Stone, 2004) which also showed an increase in positive emotions closer to her suicide.

Leenaars and Wenckstern (1998) analyzed the poems written by Sylvia in the last 6 months of her life, using a thematic coding system of their own devising, and found evidence of unbearable pain, loss, and abandonment, themes that are commonly found in suicide notes. Faradika et al. (2019) selected four poems from Plath's collection (1992): *Full Fathom Five* (written in 1958), *I Am Vertical* (written in 1961), *Ariel* (written in 1962), and *Edge* (her last poem, written in 1963). Faradika et al. (2019) suggested that the content of the poems reflect a movement from death as unacceptable, death as an avoidable choice, death as a gate for re-birth, and finally death as a final solution. In *Full Fathom Five*, the narrator talks to an old man (possibly her father) who had died, but death has a negative connotation. In *I Am Vertical*, she would rather be horizontal. She contrasts a tree, which is immortal with herself as one who must soon un-petal. *Edge* begins with the lines, "The woman is perfect, her dead body wears the smile of accomplishment" (Plath, 1992, p. 272). In order to choose suicide, death must become acceptable or, at least, preferable to life. Faradika et al. (2019) are persuasive, but the choice of four poems from a collection must be justified. Could the choice of four other poems have illustrated a different trend?

Van Pelt (1997) uses this first line of *Edge*, as well as other poems and diary entries, to note Sylvia's drive for perfection and her ego ideal (a punishing ego ideal when she failed) that she had established for herself—to be a great writer. At the end of her life, the poor reviews of her book *The Bell Jar* (published under a pseudonym) and the departure of Ted Hughes for another woman meant that her ego ideal was unobtainable, certainly temporarily and perhaps permanently.

4 The Bell Jar

It is difficult to interpret Sylvia's novel *The Bell Jar* (1971). It was written during the last year of her life, at the same time that she was writing emotional and powerful poems, which were published after her death. The question is, therefore, does the

novel reflect her mind at the time of writing or was she trying to recapture the state of her mind at the age of 21? Esther, the name of the protagonist of the novel, appears to have little or no self-insight, and she seems to have learned little from her psychiatrist, Dr. Nolan, if indeed any psychotherapy was conducted for none is mentioned in the novel.

The novel is based on Plath's experience during her internship at *Mademoiselle* and the aftermath. Esther comes across as naïve and very unsure of herself. She follows others and is hard-pressed to make a decision about what she wants to do. She does not enjoy the experience, which is understandable since it is not the kind of experience that a serious writer would enjoy.[16] Esther has become depressed and unmotivated. When asked her plans after graduation by her supervisor at the magazine, she answers truthfully that she does not know. She says that has stopped sleeping, eating, reading, and bathing, she cannot make decisions, and she has decided to abandon her senior thesis and the honors program. She has lost her self-confidence and says that all she is good at is winning prizes and scholarships, achievements which would seem to be quite good. Her mental state seems to have been characterized by depression, with no sign of the mania that characterized the last few months of her life.

One aspect of Sylvia's life (and, therefore, perhaps the novel) that is important, although it is not mentioned in the novel, is that Esther is on a scholarship at a college in the group known as the Seven Sisters, a group that complements the Ivy League universities for men.[17] I have known women who attended these colleges on scholarships, and I have taught at one of the colleges in the group. Scholarship students experienced their lower status compared to the students from wealthy homes who did not need or warrant scholarships. On occasions, the students on scholarships had to act as waitresses in the dining halls, which made their low status obvious to all.[18] In the novel, Esther comments frequently on her lack of skills in social occasions because she was never taught these skills by her family. Esther notes that she never learned to play bridge at college the way the wealthy girls did. As an example of her naivety, Esther describes drinking from a finger bowl at dinner when visiting her scholarship donor. Esther's internship at the woman's magazine would have made these deficiencies glaringly obvious to her and further undermined her lack of self-confidence at the time.[19]

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[16] Esther has applied to attend a writing course at Harvard University during the summer (for which she is rejected), which is much more suitable given her interests.

[17] My students at one of the Seven Sisters who studied on campus on the weekends rather than dating an Ivy League student, and those who graduated without being engaged, felt inferior to their peers. I taught at the college whose students called it the 7th sister because of their lack of initiative.

[18] It should also be noted that Smith College, more than the other "sisters," had a reputation for having a greater proportion of lesbians (Iminurceiling, 2009), which may have made Sylvia more uncomfortable there.

[19] One of my students was sexually assaulted by a man who gave her a lift in his car, but she successfully fought him and escaped. She felt guilty, she told me, because a typical student at the college would not have been able to fight him and escape. She was not "lady-like."

For those of us who favor psychotherapy over the practices of medically oriented psychiatrists, Esther's treatment with electroconvulsive shock was barbaric at first (she was not sedated) and not necessarily the best treatment subsequently.[20] From Esther's account, she was never given medications for depression (which existed at the time, although replaced later by more effective medications), nor any psychotherapy.[21] Esther says that she and Dr. Nolan never discussed egos and ids (psychoanalytic concepts) and cannot recall what they did talk about.[22] Esther recovered from her depression after six months, and she returned to college in January. Perhaps the electroconvulsive shock helped?

In choosing a method for suicide, Esther considered cutting her wrists and hanging, but could not go through with these methods. Instead, she overdosed with medications. In her own suicide, Sylvia chose what suicidologists consider to be a similar method, poisoning with domestic gas, both "passive" methods. While many suicide attempts using medications are not serious and often labelled as gestures, Esther's suicide attempt (and, therefore, Sylvia's) was serious. The dosage was high, and she attempted to isolate herself.

One element that is present in *The Bell Jar*, but not in the poems, is Esther's dislike of her mother. Esther dreads having to spend the summers at home with her mother. When Esther tells Dr. Nolan that she hates her mother, Dr. Nolan replies, "I suppose you do." The only hint of a reason for this dislike is that Esther says that, after the marriage, her father never gave her mother a moment's peace. Rather than sympathizing with her mother for living with a demanding, authoritarian man, perhaps Esther is angry at her mother for not standing up to her husband and, perhaps, protecting the children from his demands. Sylvia's father was born in Germany and 21 years older than his wife who was his student, factors that may account for his domineering ways with his wife and family. It common for children to blame the passive parent for harm caused to them by the other parent.[23] Esther mentions that her mother hated her husband because she had to work hard (teaching typing, a job she hated) and because her husband died early with no life insurance (see Chap. 22 in this book).[24]

[20] I always dislike spelling the term out because the "T" stands for therapy.

[21] Psychotherapists did not have the full range of systems available to them in the 1950s, but psychoanalytic psychotherapy was well known, and the therapies developed by Carl Rogers and Albert Ellis were beginning to appear.

[22] The retrograde amnesia caused by electroconvulsive shock often does not dissipate entirely, and so Esther/Sylvia may have had some memory loss.

[23] This is particularly true for children with a parent who is an abusive alcoholic.

[24] Of course, in this essay, I am focusing on Sylvia's writings from the point of view of a suicidologist. Others interpret her works based on their interests. For example, Hoogland (1993) interprets *The Bell Jar* from a lesbian perspective. Biven (1982), a psychoanalyst, speculates on Sylvia's feelings toward her mother, suggested that Sylvia entertained the notion of merging with the preoedipal mother and returning to the womb.

5 Other Studies of Sylvia's Suicide

I (1998b) examined how well Sylvia's suicide fit with ten theories of suicide. I concluded that Freud's psychoanalytic theory was a good fit, as might be expected from my analysis above,[25] and so was the cognitive theory of Aaron Beck, which focuses on the role of hopelessness and irrational thinking.

Runco (1998) changed the direction from examining the impact of Sylvia's emotional state on her poetry to examining the impact of Sylvia's investment in writing on her emotional state. This investment in being a good poet may have predisposed Sylvia to stress and depression. Creative people immerse themselves in their work, and this makes them unusually sensitive. *The Bell Jar*, published initially under a pseudonym, received only lukewarm reviews, and her poetry, written in a new style, was receiving more rejections than her submissions in the past.

Kaufman (2001) noted the association between creativity and psychiatric disorder. He found in a study of 1629 writers that female poets had a higher incidence of psychiatric disorder than female fiction writers and male writers (both poets and fiction writers). Kaufman noted that this phenomenon has been labelled as the *Sylvia Plath Effect*. Firestone and Catlett (1998) discussed how psychotherapy might have helped Sylvia, and they focused on her inwardness, preference for fantasy gratification, self-denial, addictive attachment to her mother and to her husband, her negative thoughts toward herself, and her cynicism toward others. They gave an example of how a therapy session with Sylvia might have developed.

Silverman and Will (1986) argued that Sylvia, as a result of writing her poems, especially toward the end of her life, hastened her suicide because she lost the ability to restrain herself (or as Silverman and Will phrase it, self-containment) and underwent a narcissistic regression. Lester and Terry (1993–1994) argued that the opposite was true, that Sylvia was able to gain, not only catharsis but also cognitive distance from her pain because writing poetry requires a great deal of revision, which may be analogous to the practices of cognitive therapy. Writing poetry and *The Bell Jar* may have prolonged Sylvia's life rather than shortening it.

6 Discussion

There are limitations to understanding Sylvia's suicide. The facts are not always certain "facts." What was the suicide attempt she made at the age of eight after her father died? Was there another suicide attempt by Sylvia in the summer of 1962 by driving her car off the road? Did Sylvia have psychoanalysis when she and her husband lived in Boston and, if so, did she gain some self-insight? Was Ted Hughes physically abusive toward his wife? Did she intend to die in 1963 when she put her head in the gas oven or did she want to be saved? Her friend, the poet Alfred Alvarez,

[25] See Orgel (1974) and Feirstein (2016) for additional psychoanalytic studies of Sylvia.

believed she intended to be saved, but her physician at the time and other friends believed that she intended to die.[26] Sylvia's suicide aroused the anger of feminists who, for example, continually defaced her tombstone in England, which had her name as *Sylvia Plath Hughes*, and the interpretation of her life became caught up in sociopolitical issues.

A novel is just that a novel and supposedly fiction. Poems and no more than poems, even if they fit into a confessional style of poetry. Sylvia's public comments on the events described in *The Bell Jar* are enthusiastic, and she claimed that she had a great time during the four weeks at *Mademoiselle*. Her comments on *Daddy*, when she read it on *BBC* radio, were

> [h]ere is a poem spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was a Nazi and her mother very possibly Jewish. In the daughter, the two strains marry and paralyse each other – she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it. (Plath, 1992, p. 293)

Those comments distance Sylvia from the woman in the poem, and yet, we do not believe her. She cannot say on *BBC* radio that her poem is an attempt to exorcize one of the demons in her own life.

Almost all of us have many personalities, which I have called subselves (Lester, 2010). The most common subself is the self we show to others, sometimes called the social self or the false self, but which I have called the *façade self*. Sylvia had a well-develop façade self. She was college lecturer for one year, she read her poems in public, and she spoke on *BBC* radio. Those experiences help in creating a public persona, a façade self. There may be many façade selves, perhaps one for each role or situation in which she may find herself. And then there are one or more real selves that appear when the person is alone. It is this real self (or selves) that we want to discover by analyzing Sylvia's poems and novel. McKay (2017) suggests that Sylvia "explored experiences of living in a space in-between wanting to live and wanting to die" (p. 44). We may have more than one core self, and one can be arguing for death and another for life, creating an internal dialogue, which appears to an observer to be ambivalence.

Sylvia's core self that desired death was long-lasting and strong. It took over executive control of her mind at least every ten or so years, and the suicidal behavior, when it appeared, was potentially lethal. Examination of the events in Sylvia's life and a reading of her poems and novel present a pathway in life that was inevitably leading her to suicide.

[26] Alvarez (1972) recalled that Sylvia communicated her depression and suicidal ideation to him prior to her suicide but admits that he was too preoccupied with his own depression to respond with concern to her. Sylvia read him a draft of her poem *Daddy*, and he responded by criticizing the choice of words and the meter rather than the content.

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Chapter 21
Dying Is an Art: Death in the Art of Sylvia Plath

Anindita Adhikari

This chapter examines the question of suicide ideation and its expression in the writings of the twentieth-century "confessional" poet Sylvia Plath. Her famous works *The Bell Jar* (1963) and *Ariel* (1965) have been read in the biographical context of her suicide as her writing and life is inseparable. She can justify the "mess" she has "made of life" by saying that she will "give it order, form, beauty" by "writing about it." I examine in this chapter Plath's suicide ideation in light of the following writings in which she clearly presents herself as contemporaneously suicidal: a) *The Bell Jar*, originally titled *The Diary of a Suicide*, which details her own suicide attempt and electroconvulsive therapy in August 1953; b) *Falcon Yard* (published in 1959), in which Sadie Peregrine, initials SP, was the suicidal "heroine," and c) *Ariel*, a collection of poems in which she writes things like "I have nine times to die" (*Lady Lazarus*), "I am alive only by accident" (*A Birthday Present*), death "wants to be loved" (*Death & Co*), "At twenty I tried to die/And get back, back, back to you" (*Daddy*), "I would rather be horizontal" (*I am Vertical*), or "Sweet Lethe is my life./I am never, never, never coming home!" (*Amnesiac*). Suicidality, suicide ideation, and suicide attempts define the "I" of her poems, as we can see in the following fragments: "I am the ghost of an infamous suicide/My own blue razor rusting in my throat" (*Electra on Azalea Path*), "Dying is an art, like everything else/I do it exceptionally well" (*Lady Lazarus*), "And I am the arrow/The dew that flies/Suicidal/at one with the drive/Into the red Eye/the cauldron of morning" (*Ariel*). *Edge*, her last poem written six days before her death, is the apparent prediction of her suicide—"The woman is perfected" in death, "Each dead child coiled," "Her blacks crackle and drag"—as she becomes the mother who is dead and her children have been given milk. Thus, her "words" become similes and metaphors for her suicide ideation.

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> THERE is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.
>
> Camus, *The myth of Sisyphus*, 1942

1 The Myth of Sisyphus

The 1950s and 1960s saw rise of Existentialism and Absurdism in philosophy and Confessional poetry in literature, a turn inward to the meaning(lessness), reality, crisis, and dread of existence. Though Camus' Sisyphus (1955) continues to live and does not commit suicide, the mental illnesses of confessional poets including Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and W. D. Snodgrass make their life and work suicidal. Sylvia Plath has a haunting presence in suicidal literature, similar to dead babies, red sunrises, and suicidal women in her works both artistic, like *The Bell Jar* and *Ariel*, and biographical, like *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* and *Letters of Sylvia Plath.* This chapter will focus on the literature (both artistic and biographical) of two major periods in her life, which are marked by severe mental illness, treatment, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts and are the inspiration for two of her critically acclaimed works: 1953, the year of her first suicide attempt, which she recounts ten years later in *The Bell Jar* through the thinly veiled character of Esther Greenwood, and 1963, the year of her suicide and the last six months of her life during which she wrote one of the greatest poetry collections of the twentieth century, *Ariel.* Both these periods find the culmination of a life of mental illness as a woman in the mid-twentieth century, a time at the brink of postmodernity and feminism where mental illness and suicide were still taboo subjects finding voice mainly in the works of the confessional poets and psychiatric hospitals, which were slowly opening their gates providing an insight to the world within their stone walls and straitjacketed shock treatment beds.

Although these periods are in contrast with each other—a talented, ambitious, and modern college girl making a suicide attempt looking at the future and a mother, a wife, and eminent poet committing suicide looking back at her life—they share in common the same fears of being sectioned in a psychiatric hospital for the rest of her life, burdens of being a failure as a writer, and pressures of being the ideal wife and mother of the 1960s while trying to write as a poet far ahead of her times about subjects that share the intensity of life.

2 The Bell Jar

As Plath's Esther Greenwood leaves New York after the guest editorship at *Mademoiselle* just like Plath did in the June of 1953, she drops items of her wardrobe from the hotel roof just like she dropped hints of her severe depression in a letter to her brother Warren talking about going back home: "I will let you know

what train my coffin will come in on […] All I have needs washing, bleaching, airing […] oh God, it is unbelievable to think of all this at once […] my mind will split open" (Plath, 2017, pp. 641–643).

She wrote in her journal how the "New York: pain, parties, work" were an "utter nihilistic shock" (Plath, 2000, p. 187). Her journal entries of July 1953 reflect her existential dread about her choices in life, she writes: "practically 3 months of godawful time, you are paralyzed, shocked, thrown into a nausea, a stasis […] [her fantasies of] razors and self-wounds & going out and ending it all" (2000, pp. 185–187). One reason for her crippling depression at the time was also her inability to conform with the rules for women, as she says in *The Bell Jar.* She wanted "to shoot off in all directions" unlike being "the place the arrow shoots off from" (1963, p. 72). She later reacts to the sexist and stigmatizing society in *Ariel*, stating "And I/ Am the arrow" (1965, p. 27). It is interesting to note that during this time, she did not make journal entries until 1955, and in her post Freudian world, she too thought of schizophrenia, penis envy, and Electra complex.

Her going down and down or the beginning of her suicidal ideation during this period can be traced from her statement to her mother: "I just wanted to see if I had the guts!," which she said about her self-harm razor gashes, and further: "Oh, Mother, the world is so rotten! I want to die! Let's die together!" (Plath, 1976, p. 124). Following this disturbing incident, Sylvia had her first psychiatric appointment, and as Esther describes Dr. Gordon, she was barely bothered about her almost catatonic severe depression and insomnia. Rather similar to the nineteenth-century treatment of women with hysteria, he prescribed her shock treatment. The "unmodified" electric shock treatments given to Plath had made her worst fears come true and, in a letter, addressed to Eddie Cohen months after her suicide attempt, she wrote:

> An eternity of hell for the rest of my life in a mental hospital, and I was going to make use of my last ounce of free choice and choose a quick clean ending. I figured that in the long run it would be more merciful and inexpensive to my family. (Plath, 2017, p. 655)

The descent of miserable, exhausted, very thin, subdued Sylvia can be traced in the descriptions of Esther in *The Bell Jar*, just before she attempts suicide, where she actively considers the best ways to commit suicide. Esther tries to drown herself, but the sea and her body do not follow her, and on a similar note in a letter to Eddie Cohen, Sylvia writes, "[t]he body is amazingly stubborn when it comes to sacrificing itself to the annihilating directions of the mind" (Plath, 2017, p. 656).

In August 1953, Plath made up her mind, and she took a bottle of 50 sleeping pills from her mother's safe, entered the basement, left a note about going out for a walk, and "swallowed quantities and blissfully succumbed to the whirling blackness that I honestly believed was eternal oblivion" (Plath, 2017, p. 656).

Her suicide attempt gained media attention as the "peanut-crunching crowed/ shoved in to see" (Plath, 1965, p. 7), as the "beautiful" Smith girl with "nervous exhaustion" that had been discovered from her basement after three days, having swallowed too many pills, which is in stark contrast to her death when only one or two obituaries were in the media, that too none of them stated the cause of Mrs. Hughes' death. Such a societal attitude is the one that still paints Sylvia Plath's image as a dark melancholic figure, of her method of suicide, her marriage, and

motherhood in two extremes of either romanticization or stigmatization, when her struggles were similar to thousand others, whether they were patients of mental illness or women in the mid-twentieth century.

Having survived the attempt, Sylvia remarked about waking up in the hospital:

> Nightmare of flashing lights, strange voices, large needles, an overpowering conviction that I was blind in one eye, and a hatred toward the people who would not let me die, but insisted rather in dragging me back into the hell of sordid and meaningless existence. (2017, p. 656)

This provides an insight into her state of mind at the point of attempting suicide, which, though had causes including experience in New York, rejection from creative writing course, inability to write thesis on James Joyce, dread and expense of treatment, at its core lies her depression worsened by the social understanding of her life as an intellectual and ambitious woman, her mental illness, her (lack of) sexual freedom, her literary career, and her role in marriage (see Chaps. 2, 20, and 22 in this book).

Following her suicide attempt, after changing few psychiatric facilities, she was admitted to McLean Hospital, which had gained a reputation for its famous artistic patients including Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Susanna Kaysen, and David Foster Wallace. It was in Dr. Tiffany Barnhouse Beuscher that Sylvia found an intellectual, ambitious married woman that she admired and continued to consult her until confessing about wanting to die in her last letter to her in February, 1963. *The Bell Jar* recounts Plath's experience at McLean following her through the corridors of Caplan (Codman House) and Belsize (Belknap), passing months switching treatments from insulin therapy to electric shock therapy. Even during her stay in the hospital, as Esther suggests, Plath's mental state seemed to worsen with the almost Freudian hate of her mother and nothing to do without the possibility of recovering. She was suicidal again. Dr. Nolan prescribes Esther shock treatment, and she says, "[i]f anyone does that to me again, I'll kill myself" (Plath, 1963, p. 189), which seems relevant to her second period of depression. During the last days of her life when one of her concerns was being sectioned in a mental hospital, she dreaded being given the unmodified electro convulsive therapy and thought it was better to end it all. A series of shock treatments given to Esther and Plath seemed to have "lifted The Bell Jar." They were as traumatic as a punishment given to her. In a letter to Dr. Beuscher, written days before her suicide, she recalls, "the return of my madness, my paralysis, my fear & vision of the worst—cowardly withdrawal, a mental hospital, lobotomies" (Plath, 2018, p. 967). Though Esther is cured at the end of *The Bell Jar*, as she steps into the final interview. But nearly a decade later, Plath has a relapse into mental illness and suicidal tendency. She has become the woman she had dreaded in the past. The reconciliation of questions about her identity as a great poet and her disintegrating marriage and motherhood seemed impossible to her then. This is clear from a passage in *The Bell Jar*, which not only has literary merit but a haunting foreshadowing of her future:

> I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig

> was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out. I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet. (Plath, 1963, pp. 62–63)

3 Ariel

In September 1962, on the edge of writing one of the greatest collections of poetry, Plath confesses to Dr. Beuscher what might be considered her relapse into mental illness and onset of another period of depression caused not due to her dissolving marriage and the pressures of motherhood but due to their collision with her literary ambition of becoming a great writer. She writes about Ted Hughes' affair with Assia Wevill, but underlying in her words is the fear of her genius being buried under her dying marriage and motherhood against that of Hughes, who had started to gain recognition:

> I think I am dying. I am just desperate. Ted has deserted me, I have not seen him for 2 weeks […] Tonight, utterly mad with this solitude, rain and wind hammering my hundred windows, I climbed to his study out of sheer homesickness to read his writing, lacking letters, and found them—sheafs of passionate love poems to this woman. (Plath, 2018, pp. 843–845)

If considered from an existential phenomenological perspective, her illness and her relation to the world were causing her state of mind to worsen as she saw the world through the blurry of her illness and the social dynamics in turn were detrimental to her genius as a woman poet ahead of her times, building her depression and suicidal ideation. In a letter to Dr. Beuscher, she talks about writing between 4 and 8 am "as a tonic" and getting a divorce (Plath, 2018, p. 845). Through this divorce, Plath was seeking to gain the philosophical, social, sexual, and literary freedom from Hughes or from herself and this manifested in the writing of her most acclaimed poems in October 1962. Interestingly, these poems were as social as they were personal with themes of horror, rage, anguish, trauma, death, life, and existence across all contexts. The poems in *Ariel* are full of metaphors for death and suicide, which can be suggestive of Plath's destruction of the perfect self she had hated yet wanted to become for years, destruction of the social world that had suffocated mentally ill women like her, destruction of her personal demons that had haunted her of her own literary and intellectual merit, destruction of the (male) figures that had come to define her life now in her professional and personal contexts, and the burden of the sort of metaphysical existence of humans in this abyss.

Her struggles with the two halves of a domestic life and a literary life fighting in her head are similar to the struggles of the girl in *Daddy* who has Electra complex but has killed the male figures in her life and is on the verge of suicide. She writes:

At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back, back to you
[…]
But they pulled me out of the sack,
And they stuck me together with glue
[…]
If I've killed one man, I've killed two –
The vampire who said he was you
[…]
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through. (Plath, 1965, p. 51)

These poems marked Plath's writing with the contemporary confessional poetry of the times including the likes of Lowell, Sexton, and Al Alvarez, who were all interested in the subjects of mental illness and suicide and drew inspiration from their own experiences. She was "writing the poems that would make her name," but her depression and suicidal ideation was physically evident as she describes in a letter to her mother: "a wreck, bones literally sticking out all over & great black shadows under my eyes from sleeping pills" (Plath, 2018, p. 859). Her marriage had been dissolved, and suicide was her constant thought, as she writes to her brother: "he keeps saying he can't understand why I don't kill myself, it would be so convenient, & has certainly tried to make life hell enough […] I think he actually counted on my committing suicide" (Plath, 2018, pp. 870–871).

Lady Lazarus is one of Plath's most confessional and powerful poems that explores the idea of death through her own suicide attempts, through Nazi Germany, through the psychological processes of a suicidal person, the pain and final relief of it all. As she writes:

I have done it again
[…]
What a trash
To annihilate each decade.
[…]
The second time I meant
To last it out and not come back at all.
[…]
Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I've a call.
[…]
Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air. (Plath, 1965, p. 9)

Plath's poem *Ariel* is one of her most iconic in terms of its imagery and metaphor, but it is also a philosophical leap into the unknown, which in her case is death. The image of horse riding at dawn hints at moving toward the uncertainty of life into the final rest that is bleeding red like Plath's sun on a cold winter morning. As she

writes: "And I/Am the arrow,/The dew that flies/Suicidal, at one with the drive/Into the red/Eye, the cauldron of morning" (Plath, 1965, p. 27).

Al Alvarez, one of the finest literary critics of the day and a fellow writer who dwelt on the topic of suicide and mental illness, having experienced both, has written about the personal and poetical life of Plath. In his *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide*, he writes: "Suicide, in short, was not a swoon into death […] it was something to be felt in the nerve-ends and fought against, an initiation rite qualifying her for a life of her own" (1971, pp. 33–34).

During the time of Plath's move into W. B. Yeats' house, she wrote poems like *Thalidomide*, *Death & Co.* (in which she writes: "The dead bell,/The dead bell./Somebody's done for" [1965, p. 29]), and *Winter Trees*, which deal with the fears of an unwanted pregnancy, wait for death, and the struggles of motherhood, respectively, giving an insight to the new energy in her poems of the period, which can be signs of her having overcome the causes of her depression temporarily. As she lived in Yeats' house, the Big Freeze (coldest English winter of the century) set in. It too might have played a part in accentuating Plath's depression. It was during the last months of her life that Trevor Thomas, living on the ground floor of her building, got acquainted with her and saw hints of her suicidal illness.

During January and February 1963, Plath consulted the psychiatrist Dr. John Horder around the publication of her only novel, *The Bell Jar*, which might be as suspected by some one of the causes of her spiraling down as she had relived the terrors of her college breakdown. However, the rejection of the novel by American publishers was definitely a blow sad enough for Plath. These two months full of questions and uncertainty about her future were similar to the months preceding her breakdown a decade ago, as she had seemingly again failed to achieve what she wanted the most and was on the path of becoming the woman she had dreaded all her life. Her dreams of financial and sexual independence, recognition for her literary genius, prospect of a lover, equal status in a society where single mothers of 30 mostly were a stigma went all unmet in the cold, lonely, and dark winter of early 1963. She almost confesses these emotions in a letter to Olive Prouty in January 1963:

> Now he is famous, beautiful, the whole world wants him and now has him. He has changed so that the old life is impossible […] I desperately want to make an inner strength in myself, an independence […] in face of great uncertainties. (Plath, 2018, pp. 960–962)

As recounted by Trevor Thomas, Plath had knocked at his door one night in January 1963 and crying confessed to him that she was going to die and how she once was happy in her marriage but now everything had become bitter. It was the time when her poems were in particular gray and filled with depressive overtones, some of them being *The Munich Mannequins*, *Child*, and *Sheep in Fog*. She writes in *The Moon and the Yew Tree*: "The moon sees nothing of this/[…] and the message of the yew tree is blackness – blackness and silence" (Plath, 1965, p. 41). On a similar note, she writes in *The Munich Mannequins*: "The tree of life and the tree of life/Unloosing their moons, month after month, to no purpose […] The snow drops its pieces of darkness" (Plath, 1965, p. 73). Another poem about the darkness in her mind is *Child*, where she writes of the "dark/Ceiling without a star" (Plath, 1981,

p. 265). The poem that is the figurative and metaphorical representation of severe depression and one of the best in Plath's cannon is *Sheep in Fog*, which is a haunting picture of an existential dread about the meaninglessness, absurdity, hopelessness, and pessimism of life. Throughout the poem she refers to this foggy state of mind:

> The hills step off into whiteness.
> People or stars
> Regard me sadly, I sadly disappoint them.
> […]
> All the morning
> Morning has been blackening,
> […]
> My bones hold a stillness, the far
> Fields melt my heart.
>
> They threaten
> To let me through to a heaven
> Starless and fatherless, a dark water. (Plath, 1965, p. 3)

In her poem of the period, *Paralytic*, she again goes back to the biographical suicidal themes similar to those in *Lady Lazarus*. As she writes:

> It happens. Will it go on? –
> My mind a rock
> […]
> My God the iron lung
> […]
> Will not
> Let me relapse.
> […]
> The soft anonymous
> Talkers: "You all right?"
> […]
> Photographs visit me –
> […]
> Mouth full of pearls
> […]
> The still waters
> Wrap my lips,
>
> Eyes, nose and ears,
> A clear
> Cellophane I cannot crack.
> On my bare back
> […]the magnolia,
> […]
> Asks nothing of life. (Plath, 1965, p. 78)

On similar lines, she writes in *Mystic*: "Meaning leaks from the molecules./The chimneys of the city breathe, the window sweats,/The children leap in their cots./ The sun blooms, it is a geranium./The heart has not stopped" (1981, p. 268). The last ones would include *Words*, where she eloquently expresses the bleakness of her life: "A white skull,/Eaten by weedy greens […] From bottom of the pool, fixed stars/Govern a life" (1965, p. 85).

The poems of her last week show the numbness, nothingness, loneliness, and coldness of a person who is on the edge of suicide and has given up on life. These poems all are symbolic of retreating from life and going away further and further towards and beyond death. They all have the gravity of an elegy or obituary written by a person who is alive but is dead inside. In *Contusion,* she painfully writes: "The heart shuts,/The sea slides back,/The mirrors are sheeted" (1965, p. 83). In a letter to her mother during the time, she ironically suggests her plight in a light manner talking about her doctor sending a nurse to get through the difficult time. Another letter written to Dr. Beuscher on February 4, 1963, days before her death, she details what lay bare ahead of her in the coming week. She confesses her horrors, which give an insight to her final depression and eventual suicide a week later. She writes:

> I keep slipping into this pit of panic & deepfreeze […] [of her poems she writes] very good but, I feel written on the edge of madness […] I am scared to death I shall just pull up the psychic shroud & give up […] Just now it is torture to me to dress, plan meals, put one foot in front of the other. Ironically my novel about my first breakdown is getting rave reviews over here. I feel a simple act of will would make the world steady & solidify. No-one can save me but myself, but I need help & my doctor is referring me to a woman psychiatrist […] there is this damned, self-induced freeze. I am suddenly in agony, desperate, thinking Yes, let him take over the house, the children, let me just die & be done with it […] I am incapable of being myself & loving myself […] Now the babies are crying. (Plath, 2018, pp. 967–969)

During her last days, she wrote *Edge*, which shows the depth and darkness of Plath's depression during the period in spite of seeming to be in control of her life affairs, she writes:

> The woman is perfected.
> Her dead
>
> Body wears the smile of accomplishment,
> […]
> [Her] Feet seem to be saying:
> We have come so far, it is over.
>
> Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,
> One at each little
>
> Pitcher of milk, now empty.
> She has folded
>
> Them back into her body as petals. (Plath, 1965, p. 84)

This poem is like a literary suicide note she wrote as her last poem in which she clearly expresses the extreme suicidal thoughts that make the writing almost posthumous as if it were written by the dead woman after her death. Plath's voice in the poem seems tired of living and embraces death as a new clarity for a life, which she at that point thought had not been successful as a woman poet in the mid-twentieth century amid struggles of chauvinism in her social and literary aspects. She seems to have given up on her ideals of perfection, as a woman in the house and in out in the world considering herself a failure saving herself from a life that seemed exactly to what she had despised all along in a psychiatric hospital as a mad unknown woman.

As claimed by Hughes and others, her depressive condition and suicidal ideation might have increased from the antidepressants, sleeping pills, cold medicines, and others she had been taking during the time. Another reason commonly given is of the time of effectiveness of psychiatric medications as they take time to set in. Plath was on the verge of another psychiatric hospitalization as her doctor noticed her increased suicidal behavior and her friends were becoming increasingly worried about something not being right with her, as she was distant, exhausted, not herself, troubled, struggling, medicated, and almost "unreachable," as if going insane in her last week. On the night before her death, Trevor Thomas gave her some mail stamps and saw her standing and smiling outside his door. On February 11, 1963, Plath was found dead in her flat with her last piece of writing being a conclusion to her suicidality: "PLEASE CALL DR HOLDER AT PRI 3804."

4 The Savage God: A Study of Suicide

Alvarez famously stated in one of his essays that "[t]he achievement of [Plath's] final style […] is to make poetry and death inseparable" (1971, pp. 57–58). Sylvia Plath's reputation as a suicidal writer grew after her death and the publication of the collection *Ariel* in 1965 edited by Ted Hughes, who rearranged and added some of her last poems to make the collection raw with Plath's confessions about her womanhood and motherhood, her depression, her suicidality, and her genius. Thus, Plath's artistic genius of dealing with issues of life and death in her poetry and fiction through metaphors, imagery, and symbolism should be realized in relation with the themes of her work like mental illness, sex, motherhood, love, pain, suicide, and death, while remembering that she was much more than a confessional writer and analyzing the social, psychiatric, philosophical, and, to a certain limit, personal causes behind her suicide and death. Thus, to put it in Sylvia Plath's own words (the opening sentences of the poem *The Moon and The Yew Tree*): "This is the light of the mind, cold and planetary/The trees of the mind are black. The light is blue" (1965, p. 41).

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Chapter 22
One Wrist, Then the Other Wrist: The Mind Style of a Suicidal Protagonist as Portrayed in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

Fionnula Simpson

Often regarded as part novel, part autobiography, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* is "the story of a poet who tries to end her life written by a poet who did," as Moss stated in "Dying: An Introduction" (*The New Yorker*). Several critics have performed linguistic analyses of the text, which emphasize the realistic and compelling nature of the protagonist's experience with depression, such as Marcarian and Wilkinson's outline of Esther's depressive symptoms and Hunt and Carter's review of the novel's most frequently used words and phrases. These investigations view Esther's fictional suicidality as a real-life problem and direct the reader's attention to the warning signs evident in her thought patterns and behavior. This chapter builds on these studies by analyzing Plath's creation of a unique mind style—a stylistic term used to refer to the linguistic features, which portray narrative voice and viewpoint within a text, according to Semino in "Mind Style 25 Years On" (*Style*). By performing a close analysis of the descriptive passages and metaphors, which contribute to mind style, the chapter identifies several literary techniques, which convey suicidal feelings to the reader. Esther's use of wry humor, her experience of a split-self, and her visions of the passage of time as a set of physical objects all contribute to the effect of defamiliarization, which is an important facet of mind style creation according to Semino's definition. This chapter's focus on suicidal mind style within *The Bell Jar* encourages a critical reading of the literary methods used to convey suicidality in Plath's work.

Sylvia Plath's only novel, *The Bell Jar,* was first published in Britain in 1963 under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas. As the novel was released just one month before her suicide, critics have overwhelmingly noted the alignment between Plath's own life and the life of her heroine, Esther, referring to the novel as "fiction that cannot escape being read in part as autobiography" (Moss, 1971, para. 1), "recorded

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rather than imagined," and "a journal done up as a novel" (Maloff, 1971, para. 2). It is certainly difficult to ignore the overlap between Esther's experience of depression and Plath's own, particularly as the protagonist's breakdown follows a recognizable trajectory of anhedonia and depersonalization leading to eventual suicidality. Several critics have performed linguistic analyses of the text, which emphasize the realistic and compelling nature of the protagonist's experience with depression, such as Marcarian and Wilkinson's (2017) outline of Esther's depressive symptoms—which, they argue, closely align with diagnostic criteria—and Hunt and Carter's (2012) review of the novel's most frequently used words and phrases, which elucidate her mental state. These investigations view Esther's fictional suicidality as a real-life problem and direct the reader's attention to the warning signs evident in her thought patterns and behavior. However, regarding Plath's novel as mainly an autobiographical exercise can lead critics and readers to overlook the skillful literary techniques used by Plath to convey suicidality. When describing Esther's descent into mental instability, Plath does not simply depict things *as they are*, but rather writes through her protagonist's skewed grasp on reality in order to portray things *as they appear* to the mind of a severely mentally ill individual. This narration of events as they appear to the suicidal protagonist offers commentary on the nature of mental illness itself, in a manner that subtly influences the reader's perception and understanding of depression and suicidality. In this chapter, I argue that in identifying and considering the literary techniques, which are employed by Plath to convey suicidal feelings, it is useful to examine *The Bell Jar* through the lens of mind style.

The term "mind style" was first coined by Roger Fowler to describe "any distinctive linguistic representation of an individual mental self" (Semino, 2007, p. 2). The key word in this definition is, of course, "distinctive," for as Semino (2014, p. 154) outlines, an analysis of mind style is really only useful when a text is narrated in an unusual manner or reflects a unique cognitive outlook. Boase-Beier (2003) refines Fowler's definition slightly by interpreting mind style as "the linguistic style that reflects a cognitive state […] [and is] characterized by distinctive and striking textual patterns" (p. 254). Boase-Beier also stipulates that, in order to avoid confusing mind style with literary style in its broader sense, a study of mind style must reveal a stylistic pattern, which provides evidence of a particular cognitive state (2003). Thus, the term does not simply encompass the ideological point of view of the protagonist but describes the way in which the fictional world is processed by the protagonist and endeavors to discover what this processing reveals about the protagonist's mentality.

The "distinctive and striking textual patterns" identified by Boase-Beier are referred to by Semino (2007, p. 11) as "peculiarities of communication," which are idiosyncratic to a particular text and reveal (or lead a reader to interpret) certain aspects of the protagonist's cognition. Underlexicalization is identified by Fowler (2013) as a core component of distinctive mind styles and refers to the lack of specific schema identifying an object or a series of events. Instead, the first-person narrator may employ "generic terms […] or circumlocutions" (Semino, 2007, p. 6), which effectively defamiliarize the narration and provide a fresh outlook on what

may otherwise be a familiar or even mundane subject. As Semino (2007) outlines, the reader is then forced to examine *why* they are being presented with an "opaque" (p. 6) rather than a specific description, which leads them to form a judgment on the state of mind of the narrator—for example, that they are mentally ill, or cognitively impaired, or a child. Russian formalist Victor Schlovsky (1965) claimed that the primary function of art is defamiliarization, or what Gunn (1984) interprets as "refraining from calling the object by its name" (p. 30). Defamiliarization contributes toward a freshness of vision, which can facilitate a better understanding of everyday life and is often achieved using "opaque" descriptions (Semino, 2007, p. 6), which encourage the reader to draw their own conclusions about what is occurring in the narrative. Therefore, underlexicalization and defamiliarization are inextricably linked in literary theory and provide a firm basis for examining mentally ill mind style, for, as Semino (2007) states, they contribute toward "a potentially poetic sense of the freshness of reality when observed through a mind who lacks our normal categories and rationality" (p. 2).

Semino and Swindlehurst (1996) demonstrate that metaphorical patterns are also highly important in the creation of mind style, as they can be used "to convey the narrator's idiosyncratic view of the world" (p. 143). Arguably, metaphors are simply another form of defamiliarization, as they are frequently used to bring a fresh perspective to an everyday object or event. As Smith (2012) states, "a metaphor is essentially a word picture that says, try seeing it *like* this" (p. 356), which implies that metaphorical patterns can indicate the way in which the protagonist sees or processes the world around them. Accordingly, this chapter's examination of *The Bell Jar* focuses on the protagonist's metaphorical visualization of abstract concepts as physical objects, as well as the defamiliarizing effect of wry humor and her repeated experience of a split-self, in order to shed light on Plath's creation of a suicidal mind style.

It may seem incongruous to begin this analysis of suicidal mind style in *The Bell Jar* with an investigation into the novel's use of humor. However, it is impossible to ignore the fact that the novel is, as Secreast (2020) states, "thoroughly saturated with humor" (p. 61), much of which revolves around sexuality, gender, and bodily functions—as if Plath is attempting to emphasize the ways in which physicality preoccupies her heroine even as she nurtures a death wish. While the novel's wry humor and depictions of bawdy scenes serve one of humor's primary functions, to relieve tension (Francis, 1994) and provide the reader with some respite from intense emotional experiences, it also furthers the process of defamiliarization. Plath, through the perspective of her protagonist Esther, frequently depicts disturbing or grotesque occurrences in a detached, humorous manner, which not only prevents the narrative from becoming maudlin but also brings a freshness of vision, which encourages the reader to examine suicidality from a new standpoint.

Although Esther can no longer find fulfillment in everyday life, her appetite for food and sex are still strong, and she comically asserts at the beginning of chapter three that she "love[s] food more than just about anything else" (Plath, 1966, p. 25). This love of food is depicted in humorous, yet sympathetic terms at the ladies' lunch she attends in New York. Esther is hilariously candid about her need to consume as

much of the food as possible, and she describes "eye[ing] the position of the bowls of caviar" before the meal begins, calculating that her neighbor Betsy "would be too nice to ask me to share it with her if I just kept it out of the way at my elbow by my bread-and-butter plate" (Plath, 1966, p. 27). This sentence is interesting for several reasons. Firstly, the lack of commas imbues the line with a sense of haste, which convincingly reflects Esther's hurried need to indulge her hunger and is highly reminiscent of a child's style of self-expression. In addition, Esther provides the reader with rather more information than is necessary—where many narrators would only identify the potential positioning of the caviar once, Esther does it three times: "out of the way," "at my elbow," and "by my bread-and-butter plate"—again reflecting on her childish mindset and also emphasizing her ability to make rapid calculations to ensure her needs are met. In her article examining autistic mind styles, Semino (2014) identifies instances where protagonists' answers are alternately "insufficiently informative" and "unnecessarily detailed" as evidence of the characters' inability to assess the expectations of others (p. 146). In Esther's case, at the ladies' lunch, she is not so much unable as totally unwilling to consider either the impact of her behavior on other people or the amount of information it is necessary to provide. In addition to hoarding the caviar, she proceeds to eat with her fingers, showing a total disregard for table manners, which alerts the reader to her growing self-absorption. As Krafft (2013) points out, Esther's uncouth activities are also used "to chip away at social constraints... revealing the absurdity of social containment" (p. 293). Therefore, the childish behaviors evident in this scene contribute to forming Esther's unique mind style, which reflects on her cognitive state: she is self-absorbed, somewhat calculating, and is arguably reverting to, or remaining in, a childlike mentality, which demonstrates a disregard for social mores.

Esther's frenzied consumption of caviar and chicken later ends in severe food poisoning, where she vomits with a colleague and finds that: "There is nothing like puking with somebody to make you into old friends" (Plath, 1966, p. 45). This introduces the notions of illogicality and juxtaposition, which are recurring themes throughout the novel and form the basis of incongruity theory, which posits that humor arises from presenting a relationship between two apparently contradictory states (Francis, 1994). Esther's intense hunger represents her desperation to hold on to life, but her experience of food poisoning demonstrates her rejection of life despite her biological drive to survive. It also confronts the reader with a striking incongruity—a suicidal protagonist who is obsessed with food. Esther herself is preoccupied with incongruities and the illogical nature of living, and she observes: "everything people did seemed so silly, because they only died in the end" (Plath, 1966, p. 136). She knows that death is inevitable, and her inability to forget this fact destroys the meaning she once found in life. Consequently, she undertakes numerous suicide attempts, some half-hearted, and some less so. Esther describes one such effort—during which she tries to strangle herself with the belt from her dressing-gown—with her characteristic wryness:

> After a discouraging time of walking about with the silk cord dangling from my neck like a yellow cat's tail and finding no place to fasten it, I sat on the edge of my mother's bed and tried pulling the cord tight. (Plath, 1966, p. 168)

Krafft (2013) views this "toying" with hanging as evoking: "emotions of the slapstick comedian" (p. 295), and Maloff (1971) similarly terms Esther's "gestures towards suicide" as: "amusing […] [but] frightening" and "theatrically staged" (para. 7). What is interesting here is not so much the notion of suicide as a performance, but Esther's retrospective lens which allows her to see the inherently illogical and impractical nature of her suicide attempts even as she recalls the intense mental distress which provoked them. She has successfully distanced herself from the suicidal Esther, depicting her efforts to kill herself with what appears to be a level of amusement and certainly detachment. This defamiliarizes suicide (which is usually portrayed as a serious and permanent act) by depicting it instead as an inconvenient and lengthy process which does not always end in death. Moreover, the use of the dressing-gown cord, the reference to her mother's bed, and the simile of a cat's tail firmly embed the scene within a deceptively reassuring atmosphere of domesticity which provides a stark contrast to the suicidal feelings Esther is experiencing. The humor of the scene arises from the fact that pulling a silk cord with one's own hand is of course an impossible method of completing suicide, but it also reveals a subtle message: to the suicidal individual, even innocuous household items are viewed through the lens of self-harm. Thus, the habitual is "made strange" (Gunn, 1984, p. 25), and the reader discovers more about Esther's suicidal mindset.

The metaphorical patterns present in *The Bell Jar* also assist the reader with an understanding of the way in which Esther processes the world and demonstrates her efforts to conceptualize abstract concepts during a suicidal episode. She repeatedly visualizes time as a set of physical objects as though trying to anchor the metaphysical in the ordinary world. Esther envisions the years of her life as a string of telephone poles "threaded together by wires," and states despairingly: "try as I would, I couldn't see a single pole beyond the nineteenth" (Plath, 1966, p. 129). Later, she sees "the days of the year stretching ahead like a series of bright, white boxes, and separating one box from another was sleep, like a black shade" (Plath, 1966, p. 135). This impresses her with the futility of keeping up appearances, for: "It seemed silly to wash one day when I would only have to wash again the next" (Plath, 1966, p. 135). Esther also famously views life as "a green fig tree," where each fig represents "a wonderful future," leaving her unable to choose between them before they "plopped to the ground" (Plath, 1966, p. 80). She is therefore capable of recognizing potential happiness but feels incapable of attaining it and expresses this lack of hope using a fable-like metaphor, which would not appear amiss in a children's storybook. By simplifying the idea of time, Esther demonstrates her difficulty in coming to terms with the concepts of life, death, and aging, due to her suicidal mindset. She not only sees life as unendurable but regards it as an option rather than an inescapable fact—after all, it is entirely possible to reject all the figs that the fig tree produces. The telephone poles, white boxes, and ripe figs, which represent life to Esther, convey her horror of time and her need to designate a physical form to the years and days in order to cope with her existential angst.

By taking familiar objects and imbuing them with deeper meanings, Esther affects a kind of reverse defamiliarization, which causes the reader to develop a deeper understanding of her suicidal mindset. Reinforcing notions of imprisonment

and claustrophobia, the bell jar metaphor itself serves as a reminder that depression frequently aligns with severe mental detachment, which is comparable to watching the world through a wall of glass. Esther reflects on her conviction that wherever she goes, she will be "sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in [her] own sour air" (Plath, 1966, p. 196). Despite her outward circumstances, the bell jar forms an inescapable "glass prison," which stifles and dulls all experience (Smith, 2012, p. 357). Esther continues to refer to the bell jar to describe the ebb and flow of depressive episodes—after shock therapy, the bell jar hangs "suspended" over her head, leaving her "open to the circulating air" (Plath, 1966, p. 227), and after her recovery, she is wary of the bell jar's looming presence: "How did I know that someday – at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere – the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn't descend again?" (Plath, 1966, p. 254). Thus, the metaphorical pattern is extremely useful in denoting both the stifling feeling of imprisonment within one's own mind and the cycles of depression and recovery often experienced by depressed individuals.

While the bell jar effectively communicates the suicidal individual's experience of being detached from the outside world, Esther's repeated experiences of a split-self demonstrate the alienation and detachment that is possible to feel from one's own body. The split-self pattern forms an integral component of Esther's mind style, as it further emphasizes her inability to cope with what, to a mentally well person, are normal aspects of reality. During her depressive episode, Esther sees a world where "everything looked bright and extremely tiny" (Plath, 1966, p. 145), and she reports feeling alienated from her "old self" (Plath, 1966, p. 163). Here, using a relatively common phrase, Esther indicates that she is already beginning to divide herself up into parts rather than viewing herself as a stable whole. She does not even recognize her own voice when she speaks—she calls the college Admissions Office and "listen[s] to the zombie voice leave a message" (Plath,1966, p. 125). This phrase is somewhat underlexicalized, although the reader can easily surmise the fact that the "zombie voice" is, in fact, Esther's own.

As she considers her plans for the novel she never writes, Esther envisions herself as though she exists outside her physical body:

> From another, distanced mind, I saw myself sitting on the breezeway, surrounded by two white clapboard walls, a mock orange bush and a clump of birches and a box hedge, small as a doll in a doll's house. A feeling of tenderness filled my heart. My heroine would be myself, only in disguise. She would be called Elaine. Elaine. I counted the letters on my fingers. There were six letters in Esther, too. It seemed a lucky thing. (Plath, 1966, p. 126)

Here, Esther views herself from an unspecified "distanced mind," but her original self is still firmly planted in the domestic environment, demonstrating her ability to understand what is literally occurring despite her detachment from her surroundings. However, her likening of herself to "a doll in a doll's house" indicates her reluctance to accept reality—instead, she chooses to simplify and minimize her environment, reverting again to childlike reference points, which mirror the metaphorical patterns identified earlier. Just as the days of the year must be conceptualized as a "series of bright, white boxes" (Plath, 1966, p. 135) to allow the passage

of time to be understood and accepted by Esther, her adult life must be minimized and scaled down to that of a doll before it can be processed. This paragraph also contains a rare element of self-compassion, as Esther feels "tenderness" at the notion of positioning herself as the heroine of her novel. Of course, it must be noted that there are also six letters in "Sylvia," which adds further credence to the widely accepted theory that *The Bell Jar* is highly autobiographical. This wry method of placing the novel Esther attempts to write about her alter-ego "Elaine" within the novel Plath writes about *her* alter-ego "Esther" furthers the idea that depression occasions a splitting of the self and deepens our understanding of Esther's (and Plath's) eerie sense of detachment. Later, Esther creates a "body double" in her mind's eye as she sits motionless over her novel: "in my mind, the barefoot doll in her mother's old yellow nightgown sat and stared into space as well" (Plath, 1966, p. 127). Esther is no longer a human being; she describes herself as a "doll" (Plath, 1966, p. 127) or a "shop-dummy" (Plath, 1966, p. 149) who only appears to imitate life, rather than to live it.

This detachment from reality and from her sense of self is reinforced after her final suicide attempt, when Esther's physical appearance undergoes a grotesque transformation, which reflects her tortured mental state. Recovering from her overdose in hospital, she is unable to recognize her own face in the mirror, saying: "It wasn't a mirror at all, but a picture" (Plath, 1966, p. 185). This sentence cannot quite be described as underlexicalized—a truly underlexicalized phrase would omit the word "mirror"—but it does place further emphasis on Esther's childish inability to accept reality. Esther continues:

> The most startling thing about the face was its supernatural conglomeration of bright colors.
> I smiled.
> The mouth in the mirror cracked into a grin.
> A minute after the crash another nurse ran in. She took one look at the broken mirror, and at me, standing over the blind, white pieces, and hustled the young nurse out of the room. (Plath, 1966, p. 185)

Here, the observant reader will notice an inconsistency—while initially maintaining that she is not holding a mirror, but a "picture," Esther later indicates her own awareness of the mirror, demonstrating a clear consciousness of reality even as she attempts to deny it. Of course, the belief in the "picture" is merely an effort to deny the notion that "the face" and "the mouth," which so horrify Esther are in fact her own—a denial which is not entirely successful, as indicated by Esther's anguished smashing of the mirror. This action is underlexicalized, as the reader is left to infer that "the crash" was caused by Esther herself—in fact, "the crash" is not even narrated, as the reader is only privy to what occurs a minute later. The underlexicalization evident here serves to illustrate Esther's detachment from reality, as she appears unable to link cause and effect, or to fully realize the gravity of her own actions—something which also applies to her suicide attempts.

One of the most famous lines in the novel depicts Esther proclaiming her own life and identity while suffering from a mental illness which threatens to destroy this life and identity. While on the beach with some friends, she briefly attempts to drown herself, but she is thwarted by her body's ability to float. In other words, her

body forces her to continue with a survival, which her mind can no longer endure—much as she gorges on food at the ladies' luncheon despite her disillusionment with life. Esther states: "I thought I would swim out until I was too tired to swim back. As I paddled on, my heartbeat boomed like a dull motor in my ears./I am I am I am" (Plath, 1966, p. 167).

Here, the line break serves to draw the reader's attention to the "I am" chant, which can be read as a firm assertion of Esther's identity, albeit a "dull" one. The lack of commas in the sentence serves to increase the "dullness"—it is a low and joyless drone, but it persists, nevertheless. The following sentence is somewhat disjointed and forms a stark juxtaposition to this assertion of her existence: "That morning I had tried to hang myself" (Plath, 1966, p. 167). This shift in time gives the sentence an apparent irrelevance to the topic at hand, although it clearly demonstrates Esther's persistent death wish and her total preoccupation with suicidality. Appearing directly after the "I am" refrain, the revelation that Esther has attempted to hang herself presents her determination to assert and maintain her identity as being in direct competition with her desire for annihilation. Boyer (2004) states that Esther's "thinking becomes fragmented and her writing is disjointed" at this point in the text (p. 214), and this growing underlexicalization develops Esther's suicidal mind style by emphasizing her unstable identity and her weakening grasp on reality. It is interesting to compare the initial "I am" conviction with a later use of the same phrase, which takes place at her friend Joan's funeral at the end of the novel. Esther states: "I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am" (Plath, 1966, p. 256). This time, the assertion of Esther's existence is no longer "dull" but "bragging," imbuing the line with a sense of triumph. Although Joan has lost her battle with suicidality, Esther has not, and the commas that are now included in the "I am" refrain serve to solemnify and uplift the phrase. It is evident that, at this point, Esther's confidence and eloquence are returning.

The novel concludes on a relatively hopeful note: Esther recovers from her breakdown and is discharged from the psychiatric facility, feeling as though she is guided "by a magical thread" (Plath, 1966, p. 258). The extreme detachment, which characterizes Esther's suicidal mind style throughout the text, is somewhat dispelled, as she re-enters society and begins to construct a meaningful life. By portraying ordinary events in an extraordinary manner through Esther's extremely depressed perspective, Plath encourages the reader to re-examine their conceptions of mental illness and to identify the feelings that drive Esther to her suicide attempts. The "distinctive and striking textual patterns" identified by Boase-Beier (2003, p. 254) as being a core component of mind style are evident throughout the text and encompass a wider range of literary techniques than can be analyzed here. However, by focusing on humor, metaphor, and depictions of a split-self, this essay demonstrates the importance of deconstructing the elements of mind style in a text when analyzing the protagonist's cognitive state. Using underlexicalization, incongruous humor, and simplistic metaphorical patterns (see Chap. 26 in this book), Plath effectively defamiliarizes Esther's world in order to emphasize the alienating, distressing, and all-consuming nature of suicidality. Interestingly, Scholes (1971) argues that Plath's main literary technique is that of defamiliarization, stating: "True

realism defamiliarizes our world so that it emerges from the dust of habitual acceptance and becomes visible once again" (para. 8). By paying close attention to the literary techniques, which are used to convey suicidality in *The Bell Jar*, readers may deepen their understanding of the novel, and, arguably, of suicidal feeling itself.

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Chapter 23
Reflection of Suicidal Tendencies in Poetry: A Computational Analysis of Gender-Themed Versus General-Themed Poetry by Cesare Pavese, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath

Anna Carson

Poets have been found to have higher rates of mental illness, in particular depression. This chapter analyzes the writing of three poets—Anne Sexton, Cesare Pavese, and Sylvia Plath—who committed suicide as an eventual consequence of severe depression. It explores how their suicidal tendencies were reflected in their writing, specifically the differences in the poets' gender-themed poetry versus their general-themed poetry. Each of these poets was determined to have depression stemming from various gender-related issues, such as gender norms in society, women, romantic and sexual relationships, and/or motherhood. The Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) software was used to computationally analyze trends within a collection of poetry from these different poets. Specifically chosen LIWC dimensions were related to depression in particular. These dimensions revealed certain psychological reflections in the poets' writing, which were then used to understand the reflections of suicidal tendencies instead of general psychological tendencies. The results revealed that the themes of the poetry had little impact on whether or not suicidal tendencies were reflected in the writing—both general and gender-themed poetry were consistent in their computational analyses. The results did, however, support the claim that poetry written closer to the time of suicide is more reflective of suicidal tendencies. These conclusions could be used to further research into ways of analyzing depression in creative writers, as well as in what ways depression changes the structure and meaning of poetry. The poetry of suicidal writers could potentially be used to further research into the detection of suicide in poets as well.

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1 Literature Review

1.1 Introduction

The relationship between artistic creativity and mental illness has long been a subject of debate, initially derived from a mistranslation of the Greek philosopher, Plato. As a result, "artistic inspiration" came to be seen as a "symptom of psychopathology," a view that led to the trope of the "mad artist" (Schlesinger, 2012).

This trope has been applied to artists of all kinds, but poets have been found to have higher rates of this so-called madness than others in the creative fields, in particular higher rates of depression (Kaufman & Baer, 2002; Thomas & Duke, 2007). Many hypotheses regarding this connection have been suggested. For example, perhaps, poetry's emotional and more personal nature draws to this particular art form those more susceptible to mental instability (Kaufman & Baer, 2002). However, a definitive reason for this relationship remains to be proven.

1.2 Depression Disorder

Depression, according to Beck's Cognitive Model of Depression (Beck et al., 1979), is a cognitive disorder that develops as a result of the intersection of dysfunctional beliefs present before the formal diagnosis of depression and a significant life event. From this intersection comes a negative self-schema, which leads to distorted and negatively biased information processing, a state known as the negative self-schema. The negative self-schema is characterized by its intrusive nature. As depression worsens, these distortions eventually dominate thinking, leading to the three negative beliefs that characterize the negative cognitive triad: a negative view of the self, the world, and the future. Those with depression develop feelings of worthlessness and see themselves as defective or deficient: beliefs that the world places unreasonable demands upon them and pessimism regarding their ability to attain desired outcomes (Brown, 2013). These thought processes are the center of all types of depression, which ultimately results in a specific set of symptoms: somatic, motivational, and affective symptoms (Brown, 2013). This progression of depression is known as Beck's Cognitive Model of Depression, as depicted in Fig. 23.1.

The culmination of the depressive symptoms illustrated in the above model can be seen through severe depressive episodes, the result of combinations of hopelessness and cognitive distortions. Suicide has been seen to stem from these depressive episodes (Beck, 2001).

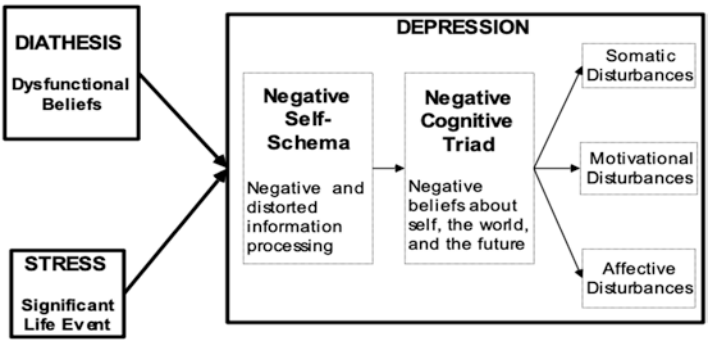

Fig. 23.1 Aaron Beck's Cognitive Model of Depression (Brown, 2013)

1.3 Anne Sexton

Anne Sexton was an American poet renowned for her confessional work. She died by suicide in 1974 at the age of 45 (Torres, 2018). Starting with her postpartum depression following the birth of her second daughter in 1955, Sexton began to suffer anxiety attacks, fits of rage, and mental breakdowns (Torres, 2018). She led a promiscuous lifestyle and idealized the female body in her poetry, often praising femininity, emphasizing the female body, and depicting relationships between lovers (Khalifeh, 2010). Her promiscuous lifestyle, alcoholism, and strained family relationships following her divorce contributed to her eventual suicide.

1.4 Sylvia Plath

Sylvia Plath, also known for her dark themes and confessional verse, struggled with complex feelings regarding her father, career disappointments, and outside pressures to conform to the female gender roles of her time (see also Chap. 2 in this book), resulting in an eventual diagnosis of clinical depression (Torres, 2018). Despite a brief recovery, Plath's strained relationship with her husband Ted Hughes worsened her condition. There was constant discord regarding her role as a wife and mother in the home (Runco, 1998). Her own personal desire to have a child conflicted with her desire to pursue writing as a career, consequently challenging the gender role that she felt she had to fulfill (Runco, 1998), a conflict that eventually contributed to her suicide in 1963 (see Chaps. 2, 20, 21, and 22 in this book).

1.5 Cesare Pavese

The Italian poet Cesare Pavese committed suicide in August 1950. Pavese's depression was largely due to his views of women. His poor relationship with his mother led to a life of difficulties with the opposite sex, in which he struggled with communication and rejection (Lester, 2014). Instead of pursuing those who might come to love him, his disdain for maternal or submissive women resulted in the pursuit of women who were perverse and unfaithful. His poetry reflected his distrust of women and illustrated his resulting loneliness and disappointment with himself (Bogousslavsky & Tatu, 2018).

1.6 Conclusion

There have been many studies on suicide, depression, and their relationships with a poet's writing, especially in the case of widely renowned poets such as Sylvia Plath (Pająk & Trzebiński, 2014; Runco, 1998; Thomas & Duke, 2007). However, Anne Sexton and Cesare Pavese have been studied less, and they have never been studied alongside Plath in one comparative study. The present chapter will focus on the writing of these poets, in particular their gender-themed work (poems centered on the ideas of gender norms in society, women, men, romantic and sexual relationships, and motherhood). By establishing relationship between their suicidal tendencies and gender-themed writing (see Chaps. 21 and 22 in this book), I determine how gender-themed writing versus general-themed writing by Cesare Pavese, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath potentially illustrates the differing ways suicidal tendencies are reflected in poetry.

The hypothesis predicts that there will be more extreme values representing the reflection of depression in the gender-themed poetry written one year or less before the suicide than in earlier poems. The severity of the poets' depressive states will indicate suicidal tendencies because suicides are typically characterized by severe depressive episodes. Gender-themed writing will reveal more extreme reflections of depressive symptoms than their general poetry because, for all three poets, their depression stemmed from issues related to these themes in their lives.

2 Method

2.1 Computational Analysis Software

The Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) software was used for the quantitative analysis. The LIWC is composed of two main features: the processing component and the dictionaries. The processing feature opens a series of text files (for this

study, poems) and searches the files word by word. Each word is compared with the dictionary file, and this comparison is then used to determine the percentage of words in psychologically significant categories (Pająk & Trzebiński, 2014). There are 70 word categories in the LIWC.

The percentage of words belonging to each dimension will be compared in gender-themed poems and those unrelated to gender themes. This software is still relatively crude as words can, of course, have multiple implications. A computer program cannot always accurately infer the emotions of a person through their writing (Pennebaker & Tausczik, 2010). It is also difficult to accurately determine a person's state of mind and mental health based on writing alone. Longer texts (50 words or more) are needed to give the software more information to provide a valid analysis (see Chap. 24 in this book).

2.2 Poet Selection

Three poets were chosen to compare the different ways suicidal tendencies are reflected in writing closely related with the initial cause of their depressive symptoms. For this study, the sample was limited to three poets. All poets were diagnosed with depressive disorders during their lifetimes, and all died by suicide within 20 years of each other. Their births and deaths were in the same time period; factors such as literary movements and economic situations were similar. The poets have similar recurring poetry themes (gender norms in society, women, sexual and romantic relationships between men and women, and motherhood). Their depressions and eventual suicides can be connected to issues related to at least one of these (Lester, 2014; Torres, 2018). The poets chosen were Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and Cesare Pavese.

2.3 Poem Selection

A total of 36 poems were chosen, with 12 poems of different lengths from each poet. Six gender-themed poems and six poems with no gender themes at all were chosen. Three gender-themed poems and three general-themed poems were written no more than a year before the poet's suicide, and three of each theme group were written more than a year before the suicide (no more than 20 years), as shown in Tables 23.1, 23.2, 23.3, and 23.4. The length variety of each poem allows for a range of different lengths and word counts to be analyzed. This small number of texts does, however, limit the results. To be eligible for this study, the poems must contain 50 words or more in order to produce as accurate results as possible. The six gender-themed poems contained main themes surrounding gender, including gender norms in society, women, romantic and sexual relationships, and/or motherhood. The general-themed poems could contain any theme as long as there were no gender themes.

Table 23.1 Selected gender-themed poems written one year or less before suicide

By Cesare Pavese[a]	By Anne Sexton	By Sylvia Plath
Street song (271 words)	*Is it true?* (1687 words)	*Gigolo* (175 words)
Two (185 words)	*The witch's life* (207 words)	*An appearance* (118 words)
The cats will know (145 words)	*When man enters woman* (103 words)	*Edge* (114 words)

[a]Cesare Pavese's poetry are translations; most of these translations are by Geoffrey Brock, and are widely recognized as the English equivalent. Brock was awarded the Raiziss de Palchi Translation Fellowship from the Academy of American Poets, the MLA's Lois Roth Translation award, and the PEN Center USA award for his translation of Pavese's poetry (see Pavese, 2002).

Table 23.2 Selected gender-themed poems written more than one year before suicide

By Cesare Pavese	By Anne Sexton	By Sylvia Plath
Deola thinking (369 words)	*Snow white and the seven dwarfs* (962 words)	*The snowman on the moor* (306 words)
Lost women (320 words)	*For my lover, returning to his wife* (342 words)	*Face lift* (266 words)
The country whore (259 words)	*Woman with girdle* (157 words)	*The spinster* (157 words)

Table 23.3 Selected general-themed poems written one year or less before suicide

By Cesare Pavese	By Anne Sexton	By Sylvia Plath
End of fantasy (236 words)	*The fire thief* (400 words)	*Lady Lazarus* (410 words)
Death will come with your eyes (106 words)	*The rowing endeth* (245 words)	*Stars over the Dordogne* (360 words)
In the morning you always come back (67 words)	*Big heart* (135 words)	*Ariel* (110 words)

Table 23.4 Selected general-themed poems written more than one year before suicide

By Cesare Pavese	By Anne Sexton	By Sylvia Plath
Smokers of paper (502 words)	*The expatriates* (256 words)	*Tulips* (621 words)
The boy that was in me (429 words)	*The ambition bird* (237 words)	*The colossus* (222 words)
Atlantic oil (404 words)	*Wallflower* (178 words)	*You're* (114 words)

2.4 Questions

Two questions are posed: a) does a HIGH dimension percentage or a LOW dimension percentage reflect depression? and b) what depressive symptoms does each dimension reflect?

3 Results

The poems were computationally analyzed across 19 LIWC2015 psychological dimensions to determine how the poet's suicidal state was reflected in their poetry. The results of the four sets of poems were compared to prove a) that the reflections of depression in the poetry became more extreme closer to the poet's suicide, indicating the reflection of suicidal tendencies, and b) that the gender-themed poetry was more reflective of these suicidal tendencies than the general-themed poetry.

3.1 Affective Processes

The affective processes cover word categories related to emotion. They include the positive emotion (posemo) and negative emotion (negemo) dimensions. It was hypothesized that a low posemo and high negemo percentile indicated the reflection of depression in the poetry; therefore, the gender-themed poetry written one year or less before the suicide would have the lowest posemo and highest negemo percentiles.

The data revealed that this hypothesis was mostly unsupported. Poetry written one year or less did have the highest negemo percentile, but it was general-themed poetry, not gender-themed (the general-themed poetry had a negemo percentile of 2.35 vs. the gender-themed poetry's percentile of 1.62). The hypothesis regarding the posemo percentile was not supported, as the general-themed poetry written more than one year before the suicide had the lowest posemo percentile (2.14 vs. the gender-themed poetry's percentile of 2.65, one year or less gender-themed poetry's percentile of 2.66, and one year or less general-themed poetry's percentile of 2.91).

3.2 Social Processes

The social processes include the friend, family, female, and male dimensions. It was hypothesized that a low friend, family, and male and a high female percentile indicated the reflection of depression in the poetry; therefore, the gender-themed poetry written one year or less before the suicide would have the lowest friend, family, and male and highest female percentiles.

The data revealed that this hypothesis was partly supported. Gender-themed poetry written one year or less before the suicide had the lowest family percentile (0.13), as hypothesized. Similarly, the general-themed poetry written one year or less before suicide had the lowest friend and male percentiles (general-themed friend percentile of 0.00 vs. gender-themed percentile of 0.12 and general-themed male percentile of 1.13 vs. gender-themed percentile of 1.34). However, the female percentile contradicted the hypothesis as the gender-themed poetry written more

than one year before suicide had the highest female percentile (4.91 vs. the general-themed poetry's percentile of 0.27, one year or less gender-themed poetry's percentile of 3.45, and one year or less general-themed poetry's percentile of 0.42).

3.3 Cognitive Processes

The cognitive processes include the insight, causation (cause), discrepancies (discrep), tentativeness (tentat), certainty (certain), and differentiation (differ) dimensions. It was hypothesized that a low insight, cause, discrep, certain, and differ and a high tentat percentile indicated the reflection of depression in the poetry; therefore, the gender-themed poetry written one year or less before the suicide would have the lowest insight, cause, discrep, certain, and differ and highest tentat percentiles.

The data revealed that this hypothesis was partly supported. General-themed poetry written one year or less before suicide had the lowest insight, cause, and discrep percentiles (0.96 vs. gender-themed poetry's 1.04, 0.60 vs. gender-themed poetry's 0.97, and 0.45 vs. gender-themed poetry's 0.49, respectively). The gender-themed poetry written one year or less before the suicide had the highest tentat percentile (1.58), as hypothesized. However, the poetry written more than one year before suicide had the lowest certain and differ percentiles, with gender-themed poetry having the lowest certain percentile (0.76 vs. the general-themed poetry's percentile of 1.40, one year or less gender-themed poetry's percentile of 0.92, and one year or less general-themed poetry's percentile of 1.13) and general-themed poetry having the lowest differ percentile (1.55 vs. the gender-themed poetry's percentile of 1.93, one year or less gender-themed poetry's percentile of 1.96, and one year or less general-themed poetry's percentile of 1.62).

3.4 Perceptual Processes

The perceptual processes include the see, hear, and feel dimensions. It was hypothesized that a low see and hear and a high feel percentile indicated the reflection of depression in the poetry; therefore, the gender-themed poetry written one year or less before the suicide would have the lowest see and hear and highest feel percentiles.

The data revealed that this hypothesis was not supported, as the gender-themed poetry written more than one year before the suicide had the lowest see (2.09 vs. the general-themed poetry's percentile of 2.26, one year or less gender-themed poetry's percentile of 2.39, and one year or less general-themed poetry's percentile of 3.47) and hear (0.57 vs. the general-themed poetry's percentile of 0.92, one year or less gender-themed poetry's percentile of 1.18, and one year or less general-themed poetry's percentile of 1.86) percentiles, as well as the highest feel (1.70 vs. the

general-themed poetry's percentile of 1.24, one year or less gender-themed poetry's percentile of 0.61, and one year or less general-themed poetry's percentile of 1.36) percentile.

3.5 Biological Processes

The biological processes include the body, health, sexual, and ingest dimensions. It was hypothesized that a low sexual and a high body, health, and ingest percentile indicated the reflection of depression in the poetry; therefore, the gender-themed poetry written one year or less before the suicide would have the lowest sexual and highest body, health, and ingest percentiles.

The data revealed that this hypothesis was partly supported. General-themed poetry written one year or less had the lowest sexual percentile (0.00 vs. gender-themed poetry's 0.21) and the highest body and health percentiles (4.77 vs. gender-themed poetry's 4.44 and 0.90 vs. gender-themed poetry's 0.68, respectively). Gender-themed poetry written one year or less before the suicide had the highest ingest percentile (1.52), as hypothesized.

4 Discussion

The initial hypothesis proposed that gender-themed poetry written one year or less before each poet's suicide would provide the most extreme results: the results proved this hypothesis largely unsupported, as only three dimensions (of 19) supported every claim in the hypothesis. However, 9/19 dimensions revealed that the general-themed poetry written one year or less before suicide produced extreme percentiles, supporting part of the hypothesis. I thus concluded that these results support the claim that poetry written closer to a suicide will be more reflective of suicidal tendencies.

Of the affective processes, only the negemo percentile supported the hypothesis: this implies that suicidal tendencies related to depressive symptoms, including sadness, anxiety, anger, hopelessness, and helplessness (Brown, 2013), and cognitive distortions (Thomas & Duke, 2007) are reflected in poetry written one year or less before suicide.

The social processes mostly supported the hypothesis, as only the female dimension posed a contradiction. The family, friend, and male dimensions all supported the claim that poetry written closer to a suicide will be more reflective of suicidal tendencies. This suggests that poetry written closer to the time of suicide is more reflective of suicidal tendencies related to the difficulty those with depression experience regarding the maintenance of relationships, as well as the struggle to be a member of a social group: essentially, the deterioration of a social lifestyle.

Similar to the social processes, the hypothesis was partially supported by the cognitive processes. Poetry written one year or less before the suicide exhibited lower insight, cause, and discrep percentiles, as well as a higher tentat percentile. A lower percentage of insight words (i.e., think, know, consider) indicates that suicidal tendencies related to dichotomous thinking, inflexible information processing, and lack of emotional stability (Papafragou, 1998) are reflected to a greater extent. The low percentage of causal words (i.e., because, effect, hence) suggests a greater tendency to reflect arbitrary inference and overgeneralization (distorted cognitive information processing without sufficient evidence) in the poetry (Brown, 2013). The low discrep percentile is representative of extreme feelings of self-worthlessness and low self-esteem (Brown, 2013) and the resulting inability to fulfill obligation or intentions due to fear of failure, the belief that one's abilities are minimal, and the lack of a belief in future possibilities (Papafragou, 1998). Finally, the high tentat percentile indicates this poetry is more reflective of distorted information processing: jumping to conclusions without proper evidence and applying those conclusions to a very broad context. Suicidal tendencies related to insecurities regarding a story or belief, often in oneself, one's relationships, and/or one's future (Beck et al., 1979) are reflected in poetry written closer to the suicide to a greater extent.

The perceptual processes contradicted the hypothesis: all three dimensions revealed that poetry written more than one year before the suicide illustrated extremes. However, the gender-themed poetry written more than one year before the suicide revealed the extreme percentiles, potentially indicative of gender-themed poetry written closer to the initial diagnosis and early stages of depression being more reflective of such depressive symptoms. The perceptual processes were not the only dimensions to illustrate this: only 7 of 19 dimensions contradicted the hypothesis completely, and five of these seven revealed that gender-themed poetry written more than one year before the suicide demonstrated extreme percentiles.

Finally, the biological processes results largely supported the hypothesis. General-themed poetry written one year or less before suicide revealed the highest body and health percentiles, possibly suggesting that this poetry is more reflective of physical suicidal tendencies (Pennebaker & Tausczik, 2010) such as an inability to sleep. Irritability, anxiety, and decreased cognitive functions due to exhaustion and fatigue are consequences of sleep deprivation (Scott et al., 2006). Increased depressive symptoms resulting from lack of sleep and the belief that one is unable to change oneself and/or their surroundings or situation result in feelings of hopelessness and a passive attitude toward maintaining physical health (Kashdan et al., 2015), contributing to more extreme unhealthy coping mechanisms (i.e., binge-drinking, refusing to prioritize health). The general-themed poetry written one year or less before suicide also demonstrated the lowest sexual percentage, suggesting that suicidal tendencies related to the deprioritization of all aspects of life (including social relationships) and the struggle to regain a lost sense of self-worth are reflected to a greater extent (as mentioned above). Sadness, self-blame, and anxiety as a result of social isolation and unhealthy coping mechanisms (i.e., casual sexual intercourse) are also reflected to a higher extent (Kashdan et al., 2015).

The hypothesis was completely supported by the ingest dimension, as the gender-themed poetry written one year or less before suicide illustrated the highest ingest percentile. This suggests that this poetry is more reflective of the unreasonably high standards set by those with depression to feel self-worth (i.e., an exaggerated need to be strong and capable) (Brown, 2013), as well as unhealthy coping mechanisms such as stress-eating, binge-drinking, and drugs in response to an inability to meet the aforementioned standards and handle stressful situations (Kashdan et al., 2015).

It must be noted that this analysis was based on Beck's Cognitive Model and conclusions later based on this model (such as Beck's remarks on suicide in the 2001 workshop), which was initially developed in 1979 and remains only a theory, one of many interpretations of depression's causes and effects. However, his model is still widely used today in psychological studies and analyses of depression. The study was limited by its focus on only three poets and six poems per poet. As a result, the conclusions may be unreliable; further research should be conducted to investigate the patterns found in these limited results. For example, of the nine dimensions partly supporting the hypothesis, five revealed that the next highest/lowest percentile belonged to the gender-themed poetry written one year or less before the suicide, with the next highest/lowest percentile belonging to the gender-themed poetry written more than one year before the suicide. Future research could also expand the potential implications of these findings, using more poems and poets who have committed suicide and potentially comparing their writings with those of poets without depression or suicidal tendencies.

Despite these limitations, the implications of the study regarding the impact of depression on writing and how these impacts change depending on the severity of the condition could potentially bring light to previously unforeseen ways of analyzing depression in creative writers, as well as in what ways depression changes the structure and meaning of a poem.

5 Conclusion

This chapter examines how gender-themed writing versus general-themed writing by Cesare Pavese, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath potentially illustrates the differing ways suicidal tendencies are reflected in poetry. This research partly supported the hypothesis that gender-themed poetry written one year or less before a poet's suicide is more reflective of suicidal tendencies. While gender-themes were seen to have little impact on where suicidal tendencies were reflected or not, the results supported the claim that poetry written closer to the time of suicide is more reflective of suicidal tendencies.

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Chapter 24
Black and Blue: Revealing Suicidality in the Poetry of the Afro-German Writer-Activist, May Ayim

I. M. Nick

On August 9,1996, German police were called to the scene of a gruesome discovery. A young black woman had fallen to her death from a skyscraper in Berlin. It was later discovered that the deceased was Sylvia Andler, better known by her adopted name May Optiz or her pen name of "May Ayim." Although only 36 years old at the time of her death, during her lifetime, Ayim had already reached widespread acclaim for her revolutionary work as a political activist for the rights of women and people of color. A voracious reader and prolific writer, she is perhaps best remembered today for the 1986 groundbreaking work *Farbe bekennen* (*Showing Our Colors*), a book that is internationally recognized as being one of the seminal works of contemporary Afro-German feminist literature. Opitz's life and literature were colored by her early childhood experiences of being refuted by her Black Ghanian father and rejected by her biological White German mother, who gave her up for adoption. The traumata resulting from this parental abandonment was exacerbated by the abuse and ostracism she experienced as a child of color, growing up in a conservative all-White adoptive family and surrounding German community. The resulting themes of alienation and rejection in Opitz's literary works have been thoroughly investigated. However, what has received relatively little scholarly attention is the fact that shortly before her suicide, Opitz had received a devastating medical diagnosis: multiple sclerosis (MS). The following chapter will examine how the psychological and societal traumas of Opitz's past combined with the neuro-physiological challenges posed by her future to create a perfect deadly storm. Using analytical techniques from forensic linguistics, this chapter tracks the progression of Opitz's destructive pathway in the last set of poetry she wrote before taking her own life. The findings presented in this chapter assist not only in increasing contemporary understanding of Opitz's literary legacy. By helping to decrease the social stigma

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that continues to surround suicide today, it is hoped that this chapter will make a positive and lasting contribution to suicide prevention efforts.

According to global statistics gathered by the World Health Organization, each year more than 700,000 people die from suicide. Within the European Union, just over 56,000 people die annually as a result of self-inflicted injuries (2021). Among the EU member states, Germany ranks among the highest for the number of suicides per annum (Eurostat, 2022). In reaction to these disturbing statistics, German government agencies and private organizations have joined forces to help increase public awareness and decrease the social stigma related to this health crisis. Without doubt, these interventions have been instrumental in bringing about vital improvements in suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention. These advances are particularly impressive when one considers how much secrecy and shame shrouded suicide and depression just a few decades ago, when the Afro-German poet-activist, May Ayim, plunged to her death from her apartment building.

News about Ayim's death sent shock waves throughout Germany's arts community and activist scene. However, to those who were closest to her, the news of her suicide came as no great surprise. In many ways, her tragic ending was the culmination of a tumultuous life that had begun with heartache, disappointment, and pain. Ayim was born "Sylvia Brigitte Gertrud Andler" on May 3, 1960, in Hamburg, Germany. Born out of wedlock to an African father, Emmanuel Ayim, and a White German mother, Ursula Andler, she was put up for adoption shortly after her birth. A bright and inquisitive child, by the age of two, she was adopted by the White German Opitz family who called her "May" (Ayim, 2021a). In theory, May's early adoption was a stroke of luck. Unlike many German mixed-race children who are forced to spend most of their childhood and adolescence in an orphanage, at a very early age, she was chosen for adoption. However, that luck was only on the surface. As she would later report, in her new home, she was frequently the target of devastating emotional, verbal, and physical abuse at the hands of her adoptive parents (Ayim, 2021a; Opitz, 1991). "Childhood," she would later write, "is when a child repeatedly wets the bed and no one understands that she is not doing it to punish her parents" (Opitz, 1991, p. 203).[1] "Childhood," she continued, "means living in fear of being hit and never being able to come to terms with that violence" (Opitz, 1991, p. 203).

Although none of the children in the Opitz family were reportedly spared, their parents reserved especially severe mistreatment for Ayim in the racist belief that in doing so they could reinforce the desired behaviors they associated with their adopted daughter's White German parentage (e.g., obedience, industry, reliability, orderliness), while suppressing undesirable traits they assumed would arise from her Black African heritage (e.g., rebelliousness, impulsivity, nonconformity). In her later reflections, Ayim concluded that tragically it was her parents' love, sense of

[1] According to Ayim (Opitz, 1991), she suffered from bed wetting until her adolescence. A large body of psychological research has established that severe abuse is strongly linked with bedwetting or "nocturnal enuresis" among children, both as a causal and a reactive variable (Al-Zaben & Sehlo, 2015; Can et al., 2004; Kraus, 2016; Sa et al., 2015).

responsibility, and ignorance that led them to imprison her spirit with violence (Opitz, 1991).

In the wake of this unrelenting abuse, already in her childhood, Ayim began to see suicide as a viable way out. In desperation, she stole one of her adoptive father's razor blades and hid it under her pillow so she could end her life when the suffering became too much. The thought of suicide, she said, filled her both with fear and longing. One of Ayim's primary coping strategies for processing these traumatic experiences was writing. Having been raised in an exceedingly strict German household, when it came time to select a career, Ayim did not go into the arts, however. Instead, she studied speech therapy at the University of Berlin (Ayim, 2003). It was there that Ayim's path crossed with the African-American civil rights activist-writer, Audre Lorde. At the time, Lorde was working in Berlin as a guest lecturer at the university.[2] Inspired by Lorde's passion and politics, in 1986, Ayim co-edited a groundbreaking collection of scholarly essays about the Black German experience. The collection was later published as a book entitled *Farbe bekennen* (*Showing Our Colors*). The work was an immediate success among both literary critics and popular audiences. Now in its 5th edition, the book is frequently credited today as having been a major catalyst for the Afro-German movement. Having become a successful editor and writer, Ayim used her talents to help co-found the Association for Afro-German Women (Afrodeutsche Frauen) and the Initiative for Black Germans and Blacks in Germany (Initiative für Schwarze Deutsche und Schwarze in Deutschland).

Ayim became a coveted speaker at political and cultural events where she lobbied tirelessly for the social recognition, political empowerment, and cultural celebration of ethnoracial minorities in Germany and beyond. As her fame increased, so too did her international demand. In the year 1994 alone, she served as a guest speaker in the United Kingdom, Cuba, the United States, Brussels, Austria, Ghana, South Africa, and Germany (Ayim, 2003). Despite her ever-increasing recognition as a political activist, Ayim's first love remained poetry.

In 1995, she published her first book of poetry, which she ingeniously and perhaps prophetically called *Blues in Black and White* (*Blues in Schwarz Weiss*).[3] Once again, the publication was a popular and critical success.[4] As one reviewer wrote: "Through her poetry, she creates a hybrid language in which African and German are no longer antagonistic, mutually exclusive terms, but two rather interwoven strands of textured identity" (Goertz, 2003, p. 307). With that literary triumph, Ayim had not only found her own voice, but she was also helping to give voice to the

[2] One of Lorde's courses which Ayim attended at the Free University in Berlin was on African-American women poets. Much of Ayim's poetry was directly influenced by the work she was exposed to during this course (Aman, 2016). The two women would maintain a deep friendship, until Lorde's death in 1992. For more on their relationship, see Michaels (2006).

[3] Unlike *Farbe bekennen*, *Blues in Black and White* was published under the name "May Ayim." After visiting her biological relatives in Ghana, May rejected the surname of her adoptive German parents and adopted the last name of her African parentage as her pen name.

[4] Other collections of Ayim's poetry that were released posthumously include *Nachtgesang* (*Night Song*), published in 1996, and *Grenzenlos und unverschämt* (*Limitless and Shameless*), from 2021.

global Black Diaspora (Wright, 2003). The resonance was profound and transformational. Soon, Ayim was in demand more than ever before.

Along with public readings of her poetry at international literary events such as the Frankfurter Book Fair, she was also a frequent interview guest for radio and television (Ayim, 2003). At the same time, she continued to work as a speech therapist. The little spare time she had she devoted to planning an international cultural arts festival, which was to take place in Berlin. Designed to commemorate Black History month, the event was to host performing and creative artists from around the world. To outside observers, Ayim's life appeared to epitomize success. However, among her family of friends, there was much grave concern that she was doing too much. The poet had become increasingly taciturn and withdrawn, refusing to take or return calls. She ate irregularly and slept even less. Worried about her health, her friends urged her to slow down. But Ayim did exactly the opposite. Her schedule became even more frenetic.[5]

Against the advice of all those around her, Ayim accepted an invitation to appear on a nationally syndicated German TV talk show where she gave an unusually revealing interview about her life and performed one of her poems before a live audience. The show was recorded on January 4, 1996. Three days later, Ayim experienced what her friends described as a complete physical and emotional breakdown. In reality, however, it was far more serious. Ayim was in the middle of a full-blown psychotic episode. She was admitted to a secure psychiatric ward of the Auguste-Viktoria hospital in Berlin. It was there that she was placed on antidepressants. After extensive testing, it was determined that the young poet had multiple sclerosis (MS).

Explained briefly, MS is an incurable neurodegenerative disease. Believed to be caused by the progressive erosion of the protective sheath that surrounds the body's nerve cells, the disease disrupts the operation of the central nervous system (MayoClinic, 2022). MS patients regularly report mild to severe impairment in mobility, sensation, speech, and higher-order thought. It is also frequently accompanied by psychological symptomology including depression, anxiety, and irritability (Bourdette, 2002; Davis et al., 2021; Feinstein, 2011; Murphy et al., 2017; Siegert & Abernethy, 2004). This symptomology may also be associated with disturbances in language processing and production (Arrondo et al., 2010; El-Wahsh et al., 2019; Noffs et al., 2018). In a minority of cases, MS may also be accompanied by severe psychological disorders such as hallucinations, delusions, and psychotic depression (Agan et al., 2009; El Moutawakil et al., 2008; Feinstein et al., 2014; Feinstein & Pavisian, 2017; Kalb et al., 2019). The progressive reduction in the overall quality of life can be so great that some MS patients elect to end their lives (Berman & Samuel, 1993; Feinstein, 1997; Kaufman & Baer, 2002; Stenager et al., 1992). Such was the case with Ayim. According to the small circle of friends who had contact with her during this period of time, the poet was not only impaired in her mobility and cognition, but she was also increasingly convinced that she was someone else.

[5] For detailed information on this period of decline, see Mertins (2003) and Schultz (1999, 2021).

In an attempt to arrest the disease progression, Ayim was prescribed a combination of drug and psychotherapy during her hospitalization.

After her discharge in April of 1996, Ayim returned almost immediately to her previously punishing schedule. As one of her confidante's recalled:

> Like a madwoman, May worked in the last weeks before her breakdown. Eating, drinking, sleeping? That could wait. Day and night she was busy almost exclusively with the organization of the annual 'Black History Month' in Berlin. A euphoric high flight that dropped her into a deep hole. (Mertins, 2003, p. 155)

On June 1, 1996, the situation came to a head, when friends received a panicked call from Ayim who confessed that she had just ingested an overdose of pills in an attempt to end her life.[6] What followed was re-hospitalization, accompanied by weeks of psychological and pharmaceutical therapy. She was released in July 1996. Her friends were horrified to learn, however, that her medication had been discontinued and no outpatient psychotherapeutic supervision had been arranged (Schultz, 1999). The repercussions proved to be fatal.

As before, Ayim attempted to resume her work, but reported feeling profound frustration and despair over her perceived inability to express herself as she had done before. Though her friends and colleagues attempted to reassure her that she was still the same brilliant author she always had been, Ayim remained unconvinced. In her mind, writing—the one support she had always been able to count on in the past—was failing her. On August 9, 1996, May Ayim went to the 13th floor of her apartment building in Berlin and jumped to her death. She was 36 years old.

1 An Empirical Analysis of Ayim's Suicidality Through Her Poetry

As much anecdotal and scientific evidence has shown, suicidal and life-threatening behaviors are far from uncommon among artists (Pająk & Trzebiński, 2014; Preti & Miotto, 1999; Stack & Lester, 2009). In addition, there is ample empirical research that demonstrates that the rates of depression and suicide are higher than the population norm for certain demographic groups within the society. Elevated levels of suicidality have, for example, been reported for people who belong to ethnoracial minority groups, persons with a history of severe trauma, and patients who have been diagnosed with chronic diseases such as neurological disorders (Bryan, 2016; Coughlin & Sher, 2013; Eliasen et al., 2018; Ramchand et al., 2021; Stanley, 2021;

[6] Despite having called her friends for help, there is little doubt that Ayim's suicide attempt was serious. When her friends arrived in her apartment, they found Ayim nearly unconscious on the floor, with a suicide note left on her livingroom table. According to Ayim's longtime friend and colleague, Dagmar Schultz, the suicide letter read as follows: "I know that my death will devastate you and bring you much sorrow, but still I ask that you do not shed many tears for me as I have had a good and long life. I have experienced more than many others who are twice as old as I am" (1999, p. 142).

Troya et al., 2022). In the case of Ayim, not one but all of these suicide risk factors were present. That having been said, in Ayim's biography, it is also possible to identify a number of factors that suicide research has identified as potential risk mitigators: a supportive social circle, a strong sense of purpose, effective problem-solving skills, and no history of substance addiction. Sadly, however, these protective factors were not enough to cancel out the risks. Today, nearly three decades to the day Ayim took her life, the question remains whether or not signs of her fatal actions could have been detected in her writing.

Without doubt, since then, the scholarly investigation of texts produced by suicidal writers has witnessed enormous advances, particularly within the area of computer-automated methods of sentiment analysis of written documents. Such quantitative approaches offer many advantages over traditional assessments by clinician-only. Chief among them are the following: a) *heightened pattern sensitivity*, the ability to detect potentially significant patterns of linguistic production and/or expression, which might otherwise have escaped the evaluator's notice; b) *lessened interference from personal biases*, the potential for the assessor to inadvertently and unduly influence the data analysis due to the (un)conscious projection of personal biases; c) *improved reliability*, the capacity to produce the same set of transparent results with a minimum degree of human-induced error, and d) *expanded efficiency*, the possibility to perform complex mathematically based analyses on large sets of data with a rapidity and accuracy impossible to achieve manually. Moreover, the widespread utilization of computer-automated software programs for text analysis has facilitated the comparison of scientific findings reported by different researchers using different sets of data. This last advantage is particularly important given the international relevance of suicide.

One of the most frequently used automated tools for text analysis in suicide research is the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count or LIWC (Nick, 2022). Developed in the late 1980s by James Pennebaker, an American Professor of Health Psychology, LIWC was developed to "devise an efficient system that could tap both psychological processes and the content of what people were writing or talking about" without the influence of speaker or assessor biases (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010, p. 29). Explained briefly, LIWC works by calculating the relative percentage of specific word types used within a text or set of texts.[7] Broadly speaking, there are two basic sets of LIWC word types: a) "grammatical" or "function words" (e.g., prepositions, conjunctions, pronouns, etc.) and b) "content words" that "convey the content of the communication" (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010, p. 29). The content and function words used in LIWC component analysis have been identified in the academic literature as having linguistic, psychological, and/or social significance. In addition to these word types, LIWC also applies algorithms to assess texts across four summary variables: a) *analytical thinking,* the degree to which the text utilizes words suggestive of formal, logical, and hierarchical thought); b) *clout*, the presence of words

[7] The LIWC also measures the number, percentage, and type of punctuation used in texts; see Chap. 23 in this book.

relating to social status, confidence, and/or leadership; c) *authenticity*, wording that indicates spontaneous, honest, unfiltered, uninhibited, and disclosure, and d) *emotional tone,* the degree of sentiment or affect expressed in the text wording, be it positive or negative.

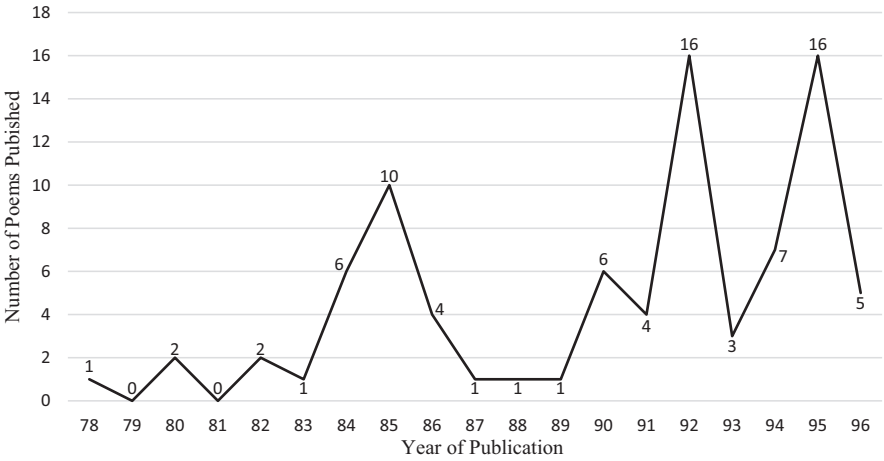
Since its advent, LIWC has been frequently used by psychologists and suicidologists to gain insight into the minds of writers (Chung & Pennebaker, 2018). To date, it has been translated into multiple languages, including German (Meier et al., 2018). Taken together, these LIWC-based investigations have shown that the texts produced by suicidal writers share many linguistic features, and, just as importantly, these language patterns have been found to differ both in content and degree from those used by non-suicidal writers (e.g., Fernández-Cabana et al., 2015; García-Caballero et al., 2012; Handelman & Lester, 2007; Kim et al., 2019; Lightman et al., 2007; Lumontod, 2020; O'Dea et al., 2017). Using this body of research as a foundation, this chapter presents the results of an LIWC-based investigation of May Ayim's poetry. More specifically, the research question guiding this exploration was the following: is it possible to empirically detect substantive changes in the poet's language that are indicative of suicidality?

To answer this question, two sub-corpora of Ayim's poetry were compiled. The first sub-corpus was composed of 14 poems written by Ayim in the years 1985 and 1986—a decade before the poet's final fatal psychophysiological break. The second sub-corpus was compiled of 20 poems written ten years later, in 1995 and 1996, right before Ayim's suicide. In the first phase of the investigation, the two sub-corpora were compared for potential diachronic changes in the external structure of author's work in terms of the number of poems published and their overall format. Then, in the second phase of this study, the two corpora were analyzed using LIWC to determine whether substantive diachronic variations in the internal linguistic composition of Ayim's poetry could be detected. In both phases, the changes identified were compared against research published on the writings of persons who were either at high risk of suicide or whose official manner of death had been ruled a suicide.

2 Phase I: External Changes in the Number and Format of Ayim's Poetry

In 1985 and 1986, Ayim published 14 poems. By comparison, for the years 1995 and 1996, she produced 20 pieces of published poetry. This means that, despite her deepening concerns over her inability to successfully compose, at the end of her life, she actually produced 1.4 times more published poems than she had done ten years earlier. In the line graph, Ayim's productivity pattern is illustrated for her adult lifespan (Graph 24.1).

As can be seen in the graph, over a time period spanning nearly two decades, Ayim's productivity was rather erratic. However, the general trend was positive, and



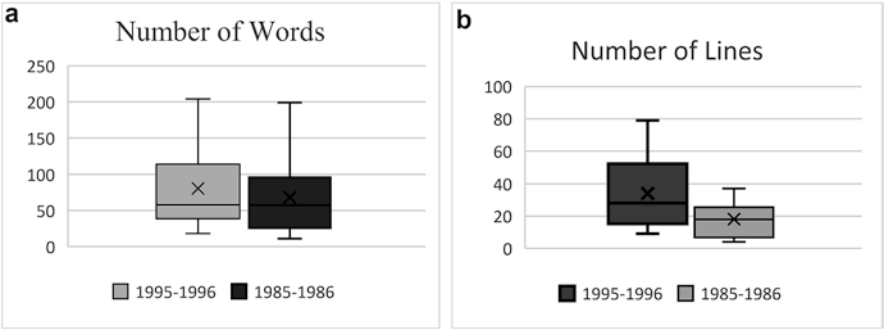
Graph 24.1 Ayim's annual number of published poems between 1978 and 1996

every lull was followed by a precipitous increase, resulting in a clear upward development. Unfortunately, Ayim, like so many depressed writers before and after her, may not have been aware of or receptive to that fact. In her mind, the downward trend she experienced in 1996 may have felt irreversible.

These were not the only textual changes detected. A comparison of the two sub-corpora also revealed that the Ayim produced not only more but also longer poetry, both in terms of the number of words and lines per poem. Whereas her works from 1985 to 1986 had an average of 68.07 words and 18.14 lines; in 1995 and 1996, these parameters had noticeably increased to 80.55 and 34.05, respectively. Another area where her poems evidenced surface diachronic structural variation was in the range of lines employed. While some of the poems she composed in 1995–1996 were only nine lines long, others were nearly nine times that length. By comparison, for the 1985–1986 sub-corpus, the range was much smaller, with the longest poem having only 37 lines and the shortest 4. In the box-charts, these empirical findings are displayed (Graph 24.2a,b).

In the charts, the boxes represent the space where the majority of the scores lay; the symbol "x" marks the position of the median value for each variable, and the full range of scores found for each variable is indicated by the vertical lines appearing above and below the respective boxes. Although the average number of words Ayim used for her poems in 1995–1996 and 1985–1985 were different (i.e., 80.55 and 68.07), the numerical range of words were nearly identical for both time periods: in neither period did she use more than a few hundred words or less than ten words.[8]

[8] The stability of this alacrity was mirrored in the number of words Ayim used to entitle her poetry. Across the two time periods investigated, she displayed a marked preference for titles with one or two words (e.g., vatersuche [1985], selbstgesprach [1986], rückblick [1995], exodus [1995], stille [1996], schatten [1996]).



Graph 24.2 (**a**,**b**) Number of words and lines contained in Ayim's poetry for 1985–1986 and 1995–1996

Thus, despite the differences in average number of words and lines, as can be clearly seen in Graph 24.2(a,b), for the majority of her poems, there is a large degree of overlap in the space occupied by the respective boxes. This overlap reflects a stability in Ayim's poetry structural style. At the same time, the differences found may also mean that beyond that stable core, her work still evidenced subtle yet discernible changes in her writing.

For example, where the poetry lines are concerned, a substantive shift upward is evidenced in the average number of lines employed. The mean number of stanzas also rose from 3.57 in the 1985–1986 sub-corpus to 5.65 in the 1995–1996 sub-corpus. Interestingly, however, an examination of the number of words used per line revealed a marked decrease. For the years 1985–1986, this ratio equaled 3.75. A decade later, that ratio had reduced appreciably to 2.36. This development can be clearly seen in the two poems presented below: *berührung* (2021b, published in 1984) and *stille* (2021b, published in 1996, April 25). *berührung*

berührung
ich ahnte immer daß es dich gibt
auch wenn ich auf ästen der einsamkeit
tränen rollte
und gerade dann –
ich ahnte es
ich weiß es[9]

stille
ein tiefer riß geht durch mein leben
unbeschreiblich
schmerzend
ungeahnt verletzend
ungewollt
zerstörend
ich weine ohne tränen

[9] *touching*: "i always sensed that you existed/and whenever i on the branches of loneliness/tears rolling/and precisely then/I sense it/I know it" (Ayim, 2021b, p. 107).

ohne stimme
schreie ohne stimme
weine
ganz alleine
bin ich
ganz alleine[10]

Both poems have an equivalent number of words: 25 in the first poem and 29 in the second. However, while the first poem, *berührung*, has only six lines, the second, *stille*, has twice as many, with 66.67% of those lines made up of only one (62.50%) or two words (37.50%).

Said differently, the amount of space that is given over to wordlessness has substantially increased, leaving only enough room for a simple sentence, a short phrase, or a single word. To a certain extent, the increasing silence in Ayim's poetry may mirror her progressive struggle to articulate herself. As she divulged to her one of her dearest friends shortly before her suicide, she felt increasingly consumed by an emptiness and loneliness so profound that she could barely summon the strength to write (Schultz, 1999). This does not mean that the words Ayim ultimately chose during this period of struggle were less powerful than they had been before. In fact, exactly the opposite may be the case. As the silence encroaches, Ayim nevertheless succeeds in distilling her language such that with a minimum of expression she is able to articulate the naked essence of her experience. In many ways, Ayim's valiant struggle, epitomizes a truth her friend and mentor Audre Lorde articulated before succumbing to her own painful and premature death: "what renders us most vulnerable is the source of our greatest strength" (Hammond, 1980, p. 18).

3 Phase II: Internal Changes in the Composition of Ayim's Poetry

Using the German-language version of LIWC, the poetry compiled in the two subcorpora were compared across all 80 features to determine which variables demonstrated the largest degree of diachronic change. The ten features that evidenced the greatest degree of increase and decrease between 1985–1986 and 1995–1996 are displayed in Table 24.1. Once these LIWC features were identified, tests of statistical significance were performed to determine which, if any, demonstrated a diachronic change greater than one would have expected if chance alone were operating (Table 24.2).

Examining the results presented in Table 24.1, it is remarkable just how much Ayim's private somato-psychic struggles can be seen in the LIWC profile of poetry. Both Ayim's reported social withdrawal as well as her preoccupation with her

[10] *silence*: "a deep fault-line runs through my life/indescribable/painful/unimaginably hurtful/undesirably/destructive/i cry without tears/without voice/i scream without voice/i cry/completely alone/i am/completely alone" (Ayim, 2021b, p. 214).

Table 24.1 The LIWC variables with the largest degree of change between 1985–1986 and 1995–1996

Top ten increases					Top ten decreases				
Rank	Category	85/86	95/96	Dif.	Rank	Category	85/86	95/96	Dif.
1	**Analytic**	**48.50**	**82.28**	**35.78**	1	Dictionary	156.01	81.90	74.11
2	Authenticity	135.68	140.51	4.83	2	Clout	112.40	56.56	55.84
3	**Health**	**0.43**	**1.67**	**1.24**	**3**	**Function**	**91.41**	**45.08**	**46.33**
4	Religion	0.30	1.44	1.14	4	Tone	67.17	38.04	29.13
5	**Motion**	**2.71**	**3.54**	**0.83**	**5**	**Pronoun**	**37.18**	**9.12**	**28.06**
6	Death	0.66	1.39	0.73	6	CogProc	31.54	10.28	21.26
7	Quote	0.22	0.79	0.57	7	Ppron	27.53	6.30	21.23
8	Sexual	0.16	0.66	0.50	**8**	**Social**	**23.88**	**7.41**	**19.47**
9	**Biological process**	**6.97**	**7.18**	**0.21**	9	SixLtr	42.67	26.90	15.77
10	Sad	2.59	2.77	0.18	**10**	**Verb**	**24.94**	**9.49**	**15.45**

Table 24.2 Means, standard deviations, test coefficients, and p-values (of LIWC categories with statistical significance at 0.05)

	1985/1986	1995/1996		
Category	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Welch statistics	*p*-value
Analytic	48.50 (44.81)	84.28 (28.90)	2.63	0.016
Function	54.31 (7.66)	45.08 (8.26)	3.35	0.002
Pronoun	19.92 (6.66)	9.12 (5.11)	5.21	<0.001
Verb	13.36 (4.53)	9.49 (4.21)	2.52	0.018
I-pron	4.20 (3.53)	1.59 (2.09)	2.48	0.022
Bio. Processes	3.73 (2.83)	7.18 (5.98)	2.24	0.033
Health	0.23 (0.47)	1.67 (1.72)	3.56	0.002
Motion	1.45 (1.66)	3.54 (3.31)	2.42	0.022
Social	12.79 (4.74)	7.41 (3.28)	3.68	0.001

psychological and physical health was clearly revealed in the results of the LIWC analysis. While factors of Health, Motion, and Biological Processes all manifested diachronic increases, the LIWC category of Social evidenced a significant decrease—reflecting her ruminations as well as the progressive self-imposed isolation she manifested as she attempted to contend with the devastation of having an incurable neurogenerative disease.

At the same time, in comparison to her earlier poetry, the compositions Ayim wrote in the final year of her life evidenced a statistically significant increase in the LIWC summary variable Analytic. This factor represents language used to express formal, logical, and hierarchical thought processes. This diachronic change could be a product of Ayim's progressively hypervigilant approach to both herself and her writing. Fueled by her mounting fears over her mental and physical deterioration, her poetry, as revealed by the LIWC analysis, seems to have become increasingly logical and distanced—less overtly emotional and intuitive.

This pattern was further augmented by subtle increases in words related to sexuality, death, and sadness, as well as slight declines in the LIWC variables of Clout, Tone, Cogproc, and Sixltr. Respectively, these final four factors measure authorial confidence; emotionality, both positive and negative; differentiated, insightful, decisive thought processes; and the use of morphologically complex words with six or more letters. Although not all of the changes listed in the table above reached the level of statistical significance, the collective impact of these shifts might well have been perceived by the sensitive artist who repeatedly mourned not only her change in writing. Her relationship to it had altered as well.

As Ayim's inner circle reported, the artist did not attempt to hide her increasing difficulties in finding her poetic voice. She openly and with increasing frequency spoke about it with unflinching candor and vulnerability. Literary evidence of this raw sincerity was also detected in the LIWC feature analysis of her poetry. The pieces Ayim created immediately before her demise registered an empirically discernible, albeit statistically insignificant, increase in the LIWC variable authenticity, which measures honesty and disclosure. These qualities are beautifully exemplified in Ayim's haunting poem called *ewiglich* (2021b, published in 1996, March 1):

die sonne der mond die sterne
fest im herz verankert
zwischen freud und leid
falten hoffnungen in sorgen
liebe
in wissen und gewissen
un wissen
licht und schatten
in gedanken und worte

ich erwache
hinter mauern:
tränen
glücklich in
trostlosen träumen

schau wie ich sterbe
mit humor und verzweiflung
ich trage krankheit dem tod entgegen
und mich selbst
in ein ewiges leben[11]

Much like the oppositions of light and shadow, joy and suffering, hope and despair displayed in this 1996 poem, the simplicity of Ayim's lexical and syntactic choices creates a powerful counterbalance to the profound message conveyed on the semantic and pragmatic levels: namely, for a body burdened by severe illness, there is

[11] *eternity*: "the sun the moon the stars/firmly anchored in my heart/between joy and suffering/hopes folded into worries/love/in knowledge and conscience/ignorance/ight and shadow/in thoughts and words/awake/behind walls/tears/happy in/inconsolable dreams/watch how i am dying/with humor and despair/i am carrying illness/and my self/into an eternal life" (Ayim, 2021b, p. 224).

eternal life in the finality of death. Importantly, many of the abovementioned diachronic alterations in Ayim's writing have also been commonly identified in the language of other individuals who elected to put an end to their lives. These changes include the following: a) increases in words relating to death and sadness; b) decreases in words expressing emotions and social connections, and c) changes in verb use (Homan et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2019; O'Dea et al., 2017; Stirman & Pennebaker, 2001; Van den Nest et al., 2019).

The fact that Ayim's poetry demonstrated statistically significant changes in many of these areas may relate to the writer's growing suicidality. Another diachronic change, which might also have been a linguistic harbinger of Ayim's demise, was her use of pronouns. Although her overall use of pronouns was found to significantly decrease between the two time periods represented by the 1985–1986 and 1995–1996 sub-corpora, there was a statistically significant increase detected in the poet's use of first-person singular pronouns (e.g., I, me, my). Across numerous investigations, this authorial feature has been consistently flagged as a strong linguistic indicator of both depression and suicidality (Berry-Blunt et al., 2021; Fernández-Cabana et al., 2015; Rude et al., 2004; Silvia & Duval, 2001; Smith & Greenberg, 1981; Stirman & Pennebaker, 2001). It has been theorized that the markedly higher incidence of so-called "I-words" in the writings of suicidal individuals reflects a toxic preoccupation with themselves and their difficulties. If left unchecked, this negative self-fixation may constrict an individual's thought processes to such an extent that, like May Ayim, the individual becomes unable to conceive of nonlethal strategies for ending their pain.

4 Conclusion

Although admittedly far more research is needed, the fact that certain linguistic characteristics have been consistently identified as correlates of suicidal thoughts and behaviors across a wide range of research methodologies, text types, and demographic subjects is of tremendous importance. As Stirman and Pennebaker (2001, p. 521) explain, such results mean that:

> text analysis can be used as a tool for understanding the way that psychological pain, preoccupation with death and self, and association between thought and feeling can be manifested in writing and potentially predict (or indicate the current state of) psychological and emotional health.

The purpose of this investigation was to determine whether and how the poetry of May Ayim could be used to empirically track the writer's lethal decline and demise. Based on the text analysis presented in this chapter, that question can be answered in the affirmative. The statistical approach profiled here revealed both subtle and significant changes in Ayim's poetry that may not only have reflected the challenges she faced in her life but also may have harbingered the manner of her death.

That having been said, this investigation was, of course, not without its limitations. For example, the text analysis was limited to a single text type. Although Ayim's undisputed first love was poetry, her writing spanned many genres, including personal letters, essays, speeches, research articles, and interviews. On the one hand, had these other text types been included, more data could have been harvested and more powerful statistics used. On the other hand, it is important to point out that unlike poetry, these other text types have formal constraints on their content, format, and style, which might have potentially confounded the results. It would also have been possible to include a larger sample of Ayim's poetry from other time periods in hopes of obtaining a clearer diachronic progression. However, as the line graph presented earlier illustrated, Ayim's productivity levels varied significantly in the years preceding her death. The large variations in subsample sizes combined with the low sum total of words would have, therefore, precluded the use of many, more powerful statistics.

Finally, one might take issue with the use of the LIWC and its relative insensitivity to detecting context-based shades of meaning introduced by linguistic creativity (Nick, 2022). The importance of this limitation is not to be underestimated when one considers the wide range of phonological, morphological, and semantic word plays Ayim routinely integrated into her poetry (e.g., onomatopoeia, anagrams, portmanteau, puns, sarcasm, irony, etc.) (Wierschke, 2000). At the same time, it is important to stress that the purpose here was not to provide an empirical analysis of Ayim's literary style. There are already numerous outstanding publications available that have done that. Instead, the focus of this investigation was to explore the use of Ayim's poetry as a potential medium for tracking her progressive suicidality with the ultimate aim of gaining more insight into the ways automated text analysis might be used to detect increases in people's suicide risk before it is too late. As Egnoto and Griffin (2016, p. 140) write, with each investigation, we hopefully move that much closer to developing reliable "larger scale, low-cost methods of automatic detection for individuals suffering from harmful ideation." Although we still have a way to go before this ultimate goal is reached, over the past few decades, definite progress has been made.

The same is true for suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention. In 1996, for example, when May Ayim become one of 3,497 women to kill themselves in Germany, the total number of suicide deaths nationwide was 12,225 (Rübenach, 2007). Today, thanks in no small measure to sustained efforts to raise public awareness about the importance of mental health, the national incidence has substantially and continuously decreased. In 2020, the German government registered 9,206 people (2,262 women, 6,944 men) who put an to end their lives (Destatis, 2022). Although this statistic represents a definite improvement, it still means that everyday in Germany an average of approximately 25 people kill themselves. Clearly, more must be done to stop this ongoing tragedy. In view of this continuing crisis, it is a testament to Ayim's gifts as a poet and an activist that, even now, 30 years after her death, her unflinching courage to articulate her experience continues to call society's attention to its responsibility to protect the most vulnerable among us.

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Chapter 25
Words in Poetry: Early and Late Poems by Haizi

Giuseppa Tamburello

Born into a family of farmers in Anhui Province, Haizi 海子 began to write poems when in 1979, at the age of 15, he enrolled in Peking University to attend the Faculty of Law. In 1983, he graduated and began to work at China University of Political Science and Law. His poems, characterized by a strong mysticism due perhaps to Haizi acquaintance with western authors like Nietzsche, obtained full recognition only after the news spread of his suicide. In 1986, he obtained the Special Award of the May 4th Literary Grand Prix of Peking University, and in 1988, he received the Honorary Award of the 3rd October Literary Award. This chapter delves in Haizi's early poems and focuses on the words more frequently used. Then, maintaining the attention on words, the focus will shift to Haizi's late poems. In literary production, words are important as they describe the author's frame of thought. According to the stylistic criticism of the Austrian literary critic Leo Spitzer, any deviation from the actual use of the words may reveal a peculiar vision of life. Proceeding along this line of investigation, it is perhaps possible to detect signs of continuity or signs of discontinuity in Haizi's poetic production, which, in their turn, might shed some light on his decision to take his life as he did when he was just 25 years old.

1 Too Early an Ending

Haizi (see Admussen, 2021) was only 25 years old when he died on March 26, 1989, near Shanhaiguan, about 300 km from Beijing, by laying on the rails. It is not clear, maybe he threw himself under the train.

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In 1979, he was 15 and was admitted at the Department of Law of Peking University where he graduated in 1983. He obtained a job assigned by the government and worked as lecturer at the Department of Philosophy, at the China University of Political Science and Law. In 1982, he had begun to write poems, had some works published, and, in 1986 and in 1988, was also awarded important literary prizes. During his lifetime, though many of his works have not yet been published, Haizi was a well-known poet especially among his peers in the unofficial circles of the avantgarde. A rather introverted person, he became a good friend with the poets Luo Yihe 骆一禾[1] and Xi Chuan 西川.[2]

In the Spring of 1989, the news from Europe, with Hungary and Poland experiencing a transition toward democracy, and from the Soviet Union, with Gorbachev fostering a *glasnost*, a broader openness, and freedom of speech, encouraged the Chinese people to believe that China, too, could move toward democracy. In June, the excitement of the time was subdued by the Tiananmen Incident (Kovalio, 1991). Probably due to the situation, Haizi's death was progressively charged with meaning, especially after the ensuing death, at the age of 28, of his friend Luo Yihe, on May 31, from a cerebral hemorrhage after collapsing in Tiananmen Square (van Crevel, 2008), an event that struck a deep impression. Notably, before and after the Tiananmen Incident, a number of young poets committed suicide, in 1991 Ge Mai and in 1993 Gu Cheng.

After Haizi's death, starting from 1990, collections of his poems[3] were published, and his fame spread very quickly. His death became an agent that intertwined his poetry with the diffuse dissatisfaction of the youth, and his works were embraced by people: just like Qu Yuan 屈原 had become the poet-patriot who took his life to give voice to his discontent,[4] Haizi, after his suicide, at the most suitable moment, became the catalyst of a feeling shared by many.

Whereas scholars cannot avoid referring to Haizi's death, on the other hand, it is due to his suicide that his poems have become extremely popular. The term "thanatography" is used by van Crevel (2008) when explaining the difficulty to separate

[1] A close friend of Haizi, Luo Yihe was born in Beijing in 1961. He graduated from Peking University in 1984 and became the editor of the influential literary magazine 十月 (*Shi yue*, *October*). He wrote short and long poems and two years after his death, in 1989, his long poem 世界的血 (*Shijie de xue*, *The Blood of the World*) was published.

[2] Xi Chuan was born in Xuzhou, Jiangsu Province, in 1963. He is among the most famous contemporary Chinese poets. With Luo Yihe, Xi Chuan has helped spreading Haizi's works.

[3] The Chinese search engine Baidu (n.d.) lists: 海子诗全编 (*Haizi shi quanbian*, *Haizi's Poems. Complete Works* [Xi, 2009a]); 海子的诗 (*Haizi de shi*, *Poems by Haizi* [1999]); 面朝大海，春暖花开 (*Mian chao da hai, chun nuan hua kai*, *Facing the sea, Spring Blossoms* [2008]); 土地 (*Tudi*, *Earth* [1990]); 以梦为马:海子经典诗选 (*Yi meng wei ma: Haizi jingdian shi xuan*, *Dreaming as a horse: Selected Poems of Haizi Classics* [2016]); 面朝大海:海子经典抒情短诗选 (*Mian chao da hai: Haizi jingdian shuqing duanshi shi xuan*, *Facing the Sea: A Selection of Haizi's Classic Lyrical Short Poems* [2021]). Further relevant details can be found in Maghiel van Crevel (2008).

[4] Qu Yuan was a poet and a politician during the Warring States period. His collection of poems 楚辞 (*Chu ci*, *Verses of the State of Chu*, third century BC) is as famous as the canonic 诗经 (*Shijing*, *Book of Odes*, tenth-seventh century BC).

the two aspects. Ceremonies commemorating Haizi, poetry readings of his poems held everywhere with enthusiastic participation from the public, the many articles and biographies, which were published, all of this attention contributed to the construction of a myth which focused on the interpretation of his suicide as a "death for poetry" (van Crevel, 2008, p. 116); only gradually the focus shifted more toward his poetry and less towards the symbolism arising from the relation "poet-suicide," the approach to his texts became more objective and turned toward a de-mythologization of his person.

2 About the Poet

Poetry is mostly written with words, and according to Spitzer (1948, 1962), who focuses on the peculiarities of the language, they convey the author's vision of the world. The distinctive style of an author is built upon those peculiarities, and the literary critic's task is to detect them and, through them, to depict an interpretation of the author's style.

In Spitzer's theory, his awareness of multiple possibilities of interpretation allows some freedom for the literary critic and proposes a dynamic approach to the description of the author's style. Spitzer points out those "deviations" in a text that attract attention because they seem unexpected if compared to the common language of a certain epoch. Drawing from his theory, this chapter attempts one of the many possible close readings of Haizi's poems.

About the issue of Haizi's suicide, as literary critics, we miss tools such as psychology or psychiatry, but James Hillman (1964) has suggested ways to broaden the angle of observation: when turning it upside down, instead of considering suicide as a way out from life, it can be looked at as a way into a fuller dimension of life. In extracting the illness from the dual relationship doctor-patient, Hillman questions the way a patient is connected to the cultural background: is this relation harmonious or has it become disturbed? And, if so, why?[5]

In the volume *Haizi shi quanji* (海子诗全集, *Haizi's Poems. Complete Works* [Xi, 2009a]), Haizi's poems, written between 1983 and 1989, are organized as follows: 1983–1986, short poems; 1984–1985, long poems; 1987–1989, short poems; 1986–1988, *Taiyang* (太阳, *Sun*, an unfinished long poem in seven sections).

The volume has two "Introduction" sections, written respectively by Luo Yihe (2009) "代序一 。海子生涯 1964–1989" ("Dai xu yi. Haizi shengya 1964–1989," "Introduction 1. Haizi's life 1964–1989" [Xi, 2009a]) and by Xi Chuan, the editor, "代序二。怀念" ("Dai xu er. Huainian," "Introduction 2. Missing" [Xi, 2009b]). In his introduction, Luo considers Haizi as one of those poets whose creative work identifies the poet with his life (a tragedy, in this case): as a lyric poet, Haizi aligned

[5] Particularly inspiring is Hillman's concept of the "inner-killer": how to deal with the soul when the focus of the analysis moves onto the suffering soul? What if it is the soul that wants to die? The question remains open.

himself to epic poetry but could never solve the contradictions arising from his knowledge of the Chinese traditional culture, his acquaintance with Indian philosophy, and his keen interest in Van Gogh, Nietzsche, and Hölderlin. He did not solve, nor in his works nor inside himself the split between an objective representation of history and a more subjective expression of personal feelings, and the split involved in the boundary between philosophy and religion, finally those conflicts impressed on his poetry an unmanageable speed and dark colors.

Xi Chuan, in his introduction, recalls Haizi's poor living conditions and his small two-room apartment in Changping, in the outskirts of Beijing, with Van Gogh's painting copy hanging from the wall, the two Lama stones from Tibet on one of the two tables, the books about Spanish painters from the sixteenth to the seventeenth centuries, those about Indian epic poetry, Haizi's favorites, and his bookshelves full of books. He had no TV set and no radio and had been to the cinema only once together with Xi Chuan, who knew that Haizi had read everything what he himself had not. When he went to clean Haizi's apartment, his impression was that it was so clean as to resemble a tomb. Haizi was immersed in his rhythm: he would start writing at 7 pm and would stop at 7 am of the following day. Then, he would sleep the whole morning and would read for the whole afternoon. Having eaten something, he would start again to write at 7 pm.

This was his life except when he had to teach. Students were very fond of him, of his poetic approach to the subjects he taught and, in fact, in spite of his monastic life, he was always very friendly. Xi Chuan (2009b) considers Haizi an imaginative, romantic person whose romanticism was different from the nineteenth century romanticism in Europe: it was something corresponding to the divide between the "Old" and the "New" Testament in the Bible; his thinking was the "New Testament," whereas his actions were the "Old Testament"; his brain was the "New Testament," whereas the impulsive hero was the "Old Testament"; love, water, and his maternal surname were the "New Testament," whereas violence, fire, and his paternal surname were the "Old Testament." About his friend, the "king of solitude," the "intellectual from the countryside," as Haizi would define himself, Xi Chuan asks one question, elusive to answer but deeply resonating with Hillman's theory:

> This man who longed to fly was destined to die in this earth. But who can be sure that Haizi's death is not another kind of flight, thus escaping the long night, the deep-rooted suffering of the soul, echoing the bright call of the Messiah in the dawn? (1964, p. 9)

To better draw an image of the poet, a study based on the artists, poets, and philosophers appearing in Haizi's poems could also contribute. In his *Complete Works*, he mentioned Van Gogh, Thoreau, Tolstoy, Kafka, Mozart, Qu Yuan, Jesus, Dante, Nietzsche, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Marx, Wittgenstein, Mayakovsky, Yesenin, Spengler, and Hölderlin. Van Gogh has a dedication in a poem with a stunning title: *A Poem of Death (Second One: Plucking Sunflowers). A Short Narrative Poem Dedicated to Van Gogh: The Process of Suicide* (死亡之诗(之二:采摘葵

花)—— 给凡 · 高的小叙诗:自杀过程, *Siwang zhi shi (zhi er: caizhai kuihua) – gei Fan · Gao de xiao xushi: zisha guocheng* [Xi, 2009a]).[6] Poems related to the other authors could provide other hints.[7]

3 Earliest and Latest Poetic Production

Close reading Haizi's early short poems, representing his drive to write, and his last short poems, showing his growth in poetic style, could, too, add to the description of the poet, though, given Haizi's short life, there might be no dramatic changes between the two groups of poems. The way *Haizi shi quanji* is conceived, with poems grouped by periods, allows an overview that helps to distinguish and consider three main aspects: how punctuation is used, the images that appear, the associations that the adjectives stimulate. Although an arbitrary choice, basing a close reading on these aspects seems necessary to determine a standard applicable to both groups of poems and to enable a comparison.

In the early poems (1983–1984),[8] punctuation is practically absent. Chinese ancient poetry did not have punctuation based as it was on rhythm linked to its being sung. Maybe, Haizi's rhythm was after the urge of letting his thoughts out. Quite interestingly, after his death, some of his poems were turned into songs (Sohu, 2020).

As for the images, some, directly or indirectly, recall the element of "water" with words like "sea," "waves," or "boat" also happens in the title of one of his poetry collections (Haizi 2008). Then, follow references to the "sun" and to an environment: "room," "village" (of birth), "earth," "flower," "bird," or "eyes." When referring to a season, this is "spring" also as "youth." Less transparent are the images connected with the words "shoe" and "wound," which introduce other layers of sense.

Associations made through adjectives add degrees of tension since they convey nuances of something missing, or unpleasant, by using "empty," "white," "silent," "black," "unfamiliar," and "broken." Interestingly, in China, "white" is associated to funerals.

The second group of poems includes essentially those written in 1989.[9] They vary in length, and some, written earlier, in 1989, were revised. Punctuation, though still quite rarefied, seems more articulated. The element of "water" still appears in the words "sea," "ocean," and "river"; landscapes are introduced as "grassfield" or "mountain," while also the word "world" is used, and then "flowers," "snow," and

[6] This poem is printed following a poem titled *A Poem of Death (First One)* (死亡之诗 (之一, *Siwang zhi shi* (*zhi yi*), at p. 158, and is then followed by another poem which title is *Song of the One Who Commits Suicide* (自杀者之歌, *Zishazhe zhi ge*), at p. 161.

[7] Similarly, it could be of interest to go through Chaps. 2, 20, 21, 22, and 23 in this book, which are about Sylvia Plath, a woman poet extremely popular among intellectuals in those years in China.

[8] They are about 20 poems, from p. 3 to p. 40 of the volume.

[9] They are almost 30 poems (Xi, 2009a).

"blood," where these last two add to the perception of cold, fear, and uneasiness. This kind of perception is intensified by the adjectives "unfamiliar," "black," "mysterious," "monotonous," "sullen," "solitary," and "broken." What follows is *Hai shang* (*At Sea*), written in 1984:[10, 11]

海上

所有的日子都是海上的日子
穷苦的渔夫
肉疙瘩像一卷笨拙的绳索
在波浪上展开
想抓住远方 *
闪闪发亮的东西 *
其实那只是太阳的假笑
他抓住的只是几块会腐烂的木板：
房屋、船和**棺材**

成群游来鱼的脊背
无始无终 *
只有关于青春的说法
一触即断 (Xi, 2009a, p. 6).[11]

Here, the words in blue recall the element of "water"—海 (hǎi, sea), 渔夫 (yúfū, fisherman), 波浪 (bōlàng, waves), 船 (chuán, boats), and 鱼 (yú, fish)—and convey indeterminacy due to the fluctuating nature of seawaters. The words in red, mostly adjectives—穷苦 (qióngkǔ, poor), 笨拙 (bènzhuō, clumsy), 假笑 (jiǎ xiào, fake laughs), 腐烂 (fǔlàn, rotten), 棺材 (guāncái, coffins), 断 (duàn, broken)—convey a sense of malaise, "coffins" in particular. By contrast, though the words in yellow—太阳 (tàiyáng, sun), 房屋 (fángwū, house), 青春 (qīngchūn, youth)—are usually associated to a positive meaning, but in this poem, they are associated to negative ones. The verses with an asterisk are rather disorienting as completely undefined like also the words in green are—远方(yuǎnfāng), a "far side" (nobody knows how far), 闪闪 (shǎnshǎn), a "sparkling" that in its reduplicated form, based on Chinese grammar, gives the idea of a very short duration of time but not very defined, 东西 (dōngxī), "stuff" or "things" (nobody knows what), and, finally, 无 (wú), the negation of the classical Chinese that is repeated as if to reinforce the negative sense. Whereas in this poem there is only one punctuation mark, the colon (:), in *Cunzhuang* (*Village*), of the same year, there is none:[12]

[10] Since years, I use coloring, asterisks, and the like as a means to highlight items of interest.

[11] *At Sea*:"All days are days at sea/Poor fisherman/Lumps of flesh like a roll of clumsy rope/Unfold on waves/As if wanting to catch the far side/Sparkling shiny stuff/Was in fact just a fake smile of the sun/All he grabbed were a few planks of rotting wood:/Houses boats and coffins/Swarms of backs of swimming fish/No beginning no end/There is only a saying about youth/Broken at the touch" (Xi, 2009a, p. 6).

[12] *Village*: "Living in a village/Mother and children/The son grows up quietly/Mother watching silently/Reed flowers in the bushes/The village is a white boat/My sister's name is Lu Hua/My sister is beautiful" (Xi, 2009a, p. 36).

村庄

村庄里住着
母亲和儿女
儿子静静地长大
母亲静静地注视

芦花丛中
村庄是一只白色的船
我妹妹叫芦花
我妹妹很美丽 (Xi, 2009a, p. 39).[12]

A very short poem of 1989, *Yaoyuan de lucheng* (*A Very Far Journey*), encloses the illustrated features even more intensely: in the four verses, there is only one comma (,); "water" returns as "rain," the color mentioned is "black" and uncertainty dominates:[13]

遥远的路程

雨水中出现了平原上的麦子
这些雨水中的景色有些陌生
天已黑了，下着雨
我坐在水上给你写信 (Xi, 2009a, p. 503).[13]

The idea of an ongoing process suggested by the word 路程 (lùchéng, journey) of the title is associated to the adjective 遥远 (yáoyuǎn, distant, remote). The dynamism of the rainfall makes the sight blurred and adds to the uncertain mood, also the "wheat" and the "plains," images dear to Haizi, due to the rain, loose in clarity, blurring the scenery that becomes 有些陌生 (yǒu xiē mòshēng, somewhat unfamiliar). A sky, turned out 黑 (hēi, black), makes the atmosphere even denser, while the "continuity of the action" of the rain falling is expressed by the verb form with 着 (zhe). The "logic" of the image is entirely "broken" by the unexpected following image: "I" sits "on the water" and writes "a letter" to a "you." The use of the preposition "on" complicates the interpretation. "On," 上 (shàng), appears in the first verse and in the last one and seems to play a counterbalancing effect with its opposite 下 (xià, below, down, to go down) in the third verse. Whereas in *At Sea*, images and adjectives were creating the picture, in *A Very Far Journey*, the atmosphere becomes rarefied, impalpable, like an intense but incomprehensible emotion. It seems as if between the first and the second poem, Haizi has gained in complexity in modeling reality in such a way as to reach the essence of the emotional level.

[13] *A Very Far Journey*: "Through the rainwater has appeared the wheat on the plains/These sceneries in the rainwater are somewhat unfamiliar/The sky is already dark, it rains/I sit on the water and write you a letter" (Xi, 2009a, p. 503).

4 About Haizi's First and Last Poems

Among Haizi's poems, the very famous *Asian Copper* (亚洲铜, Yazhou tong) was written among his first compositions. Probably, *The Sun of Arles* (阿尔的太阳, A'er de taiyang), with a reference to Van Gogh, who had spent a year in Arles, was his first poem, but whereas this poems contains a dedication, *To My Skinny Brother* (给我的瘦哥哥, Gei wode shou gege), *Asian Copper* has none. Therefore, though *The Sun of Arles* is dated April 1984 and *Asian Copper* October of the same year (Haizi, 2009), in order to proceed, the attention will be placed on *Asian Copper* and on *Spring, Ten Haizis* (春天，十个海子, Chuntian, shi ge Haizi), from the same volume,[14] which is considered his last poem (Baidu, 2021). The original text of the first is:[15]

亚洲铜

亚洲铜， 亚洲铜
祖父死在这里， 父亲死在这里， 我也将死在这里
你是唯一的一块埋人的地方

亚洲铜， 亚洲铜
爱怀疑和爱飞翔的是鸟， 淹没一切的是海水
你的主人却是青草， 住在自己细小的腰上，守住野花的手掌和秘密

亚洲铜， 亚洲铜
看见了吗？ 那两只白鸽子， 它是屈原遗落在沙滩上的白鞋子
让**我们**————我们和河流一起， 穿上它吧

亚洲铜， 亚洲铜
击鼓之后， 我们把在黑暗中**跳舞**的心脏**叫做**月亮
这月亮主要由你**构成** (Xi, 2009a, p. 3).[15]

Punctuation is used on average and is not particularly remarkable. The words in red direct attention to the semantics of death, a *leitmotiv* in Haizi's poetry, referring specifically to the Chinese tradition when recalling the poet Qu Yuan (屈原, Qū Yuán) and the color white (白, bái). The words in blue concern the element water (水, shuǐ) and the ones in yellow other natural elements. Nevertheless, they all seem to undergo a process of personification as they perform actions like human beings do, an aspect even more underlined by the connections with palms (手掌, shǒuzhǎng), secrets (秘密, mìmì), and shoes (鞋子, xiézi). The dual "substance" of the natural elements

[14] At the end of the poem, a line shows that it was written in the early morning, between 3 and 4 o'clock of 14 May 1989 (Xi, 2009a).

[15] *Asian Copper*: "Asian Copper, Asian Copper/Grandfather died here, father died here, and I will die here/You are the only place where to bury people/Asian Copper, Asian Copper/It is the birds that love to doubt and love to fly, it is the sea that drowns everything/Your master is indeed the grass, dwelling on its own tiny waist, guarding palms and secrets of wild flowers/Asian Copper, Asian Copper/Have you seen? Those two white pigeons, that's Qu Yuan's white shoes on the beach/Let us ———— we and the river, put them on/Asian Copper, Asian Copper/After the drumming, we call the heart that dances in the dark as moon/This moon is mainly made up of you" (Xi, 2009a, p. 3).

increases the degree of complexity, while the last two verses deepen the sense of the entire composition. In fact, drumming (击鼓, jī gǔ) and dances (跳舞, tiào wǔ) recall the ancient nature of Chinese poetry as associated to music with drums, singing and dancing used in religious rituals, and the repetition Asian Copper, Asian Copper (亚洲铜， 亚洲铜, Yàzhōu tóng, Yàzhōu tóng) at the beginning of each stanza reinforces the impression as if a refrain. Then, in the dark (黑暗中, hēi àn zhōng) makes the atmosphere somber, unclear. Nevertheless, what makes the poem really complex is the use in the last two verses of two verbs: 叫做 (jiàozuò) and 构成 (gòuchéng), rendered with call…as and made up, which involve a "process of the making" that suggests the illusionary nature of reality but, on the other hand, also underlines that it is we 我们 (wǒmen) who are responsible for the making of the illusion.

The original text of Haizi's last poem, *Spring, Ten Haizis* is:[16]

春天，十个海子

春天，十个海子全都复活
在光明的景色中
嘲笑这一野蛮而悲伤的海子*
你这么长久地沉睡究竟为了什么？

春天，十个海子低低地怒吼
围着你和我跳舞、唱歌
扯乱你的黑头发，骑上你飞奔而去，尘土飞扬
你被劈开的疼痛在大地弥漫

在春天，野蛮而悲伤的海子*
就剩下这一个，最后一个
这是一个黑夜的儿子，沉浸于冬天，倾心死亡
不能自拔，热爱着空虚而寒冷的乡村

那里的谷物高高堆起，遮住了窗户
他们把一半用于一家六口人的嘴，吃和胃
一半用于农业，他们自己的繁殖
大风从东刮到西，从北刮到南，无视黑夜和黎明
你所说的曙光究竟是什么意思 (Xi, 2009a, pp. 540-541).[16]

[16] *Spring, Ten Haizis*: "Spring, all ten Haizis resurrect/In the luminous view/Laughs at this savage and sad Haizi*/For what did you sleep for so long?/Spring, ten Haizis roar lowly/Dancing and singing around you and me/Rips your black hair, rides you off, rides dusty/The pain of your being split fills the earth/In Spring, the savage and sad Haizi*/That's the one which is left, the last one/This is the son of a dark night, immersed in winter, obsessed with death/Unable to extricate oneself, loving the empty and cold countryside/There the grains are piled high up, have obscured the window/They used half of it for the mouths, eating and stomachs of a family of six/Half of them are used for agriculture, their own breeding/Strong winds blow from East to West, blow from North to South, ignoring night and dawn/When you talk about dawn finally what meaning does it have" (Xi, 2009a, pp. 540–541).

Another version is the one by van Crevel (2008). In his paper, he elaborates also on the similarity of the sounds of the name of the poet, Haizi, and the word "child" (孩子) which, in Chinese, is pronounced "haizi" too but with a different tone (a peculiar aspect of the Chinese language). The translation choice proposed here is to directly render the plural of the name after the number ten: 十个海子 (shígè Hǎizǐ, ten Haizis). It seems to stress the complexity of related interpretations.

Compared to *Asian Copper*, punctuation appears to be quite regular, but the poem seems to be built around a split. There is Spring (春天, chūntiān), also as title, a time when things begin, and on the other hand, there is Winter (冬天, dōngtiān) when referring to the one child left. There are ten Haizis (十个海子, shígè Hǎizǐ) versus one Haizi (海子, Hǎizǐ). Whereas Spring is luminous (光明, guāngmíng), the one Haizi is the son of a dark night (这是一个黑夜的儿子, zhè shì yígè hēiyè de érzi). When referring to the ten Haizis, there are sounds and movements, roar (怒吼, nùhǒu) though lowly (低低地, dīdīde), dancing and singing (跳舞、唱歌, tiào wǔ 、chàng gē), and these last two resonate with drumming and dances in *Asian Copper*, but there is stillness when referring to a one Haizi in sleep: for what did you sleep for so long? (你这么长久地沉睡究竟为了什么?, Nǐ zhème chángjiǔde chénshuì jiūjìng wéile shénme?; first stanza, fourth verse). The grains (谷物, gǔwù) of the family are split in two halves: one half to nourish the family, one half to be sown for the future nourishment for the family. The strong winds (大风, dà fēng) blow along two directions: from East to West (从东刮到西, cóng dōng guā dào xī) and from North to South (从北刮到南, cóng běi guā dào nán), and night and dawn (黑夜和黎明, hēiyè hé límíng), darkness and light, both are ignored (无视, wú shì).

The words in blue convey a sense of uneasiness all through the text. The words in yellow, used with higher density toward the conclusion of the poem, introduce to the rural environment and to the concept of cycle to which nature conforms: the cyclical process of sowing wheat to produce nutrition to live.

Against this background, some more elements are striking. The verb “to split” (劈开, pī kāi) is openly used in the text: the pain of your being split fills the earth (你被劈开的疼痛在大地弥漫, Nǐ bèi pī kāi de téngtòng zài dàdì mímàn; second stanza, fourth verse) linked to 被 (bèi), the particle, in Chinese, for the passive form of the verb: 被劈开 (bèi pī kāi). Therefore, on the grammar level, the action expressed by the verb is not in its active form but rather in the passive: the action is suffered and imposed from the outside.

At this point, the son of a dark night, who is unable to extricate oneself (不能自拔, bù néng zì bá), is obsessed with death (倾心死亡, qīngxīn sǐwáng): a statement that frightens with its clarity. Even more so when the attention falls on the words in green. The word dawn (曙光, shǔguāng), in the last verse, recalls the early morning when the darkness of the night gradually gives way to the light. Luminous is the adjective used in the second verse of the first stanza at the beginning of the poem. It is placed after the very first verse where the word resurrect appears. In the original text, the verb 复活 (fù huó, to resurrect, to recover life) is used. In Chinese, Easter is translated as 复活节 (fù huó jié), Feast of Resurrection. If a supposition is made that, belonging to the western tradition, resurrection is not an easy concept to grab for a person from a Chinese cultural background, the question in the conclusive verse: when you talk about dawn finally what meaning does it have (你所说的曙光究竟是什么意思, Nǐ suǒ shuō de shǔguāng jiūjìng shì shénme yìsi; fourth stanza, fourth verse) is a legitimate question. As well as being unable to extricate oneself shows the difficulty involved in the attempt of understanding. For a Catholic, resurrection comes after death. This poem of Haizi, apparently his last one, seems to pose

the question of a resurrection, difficult to understand but which nevertheless arises because there was already a preliminary thought of death and at the same time a desperate, movingly conscious desire for hope.

5 Some Remarks to Conclude

Haizi lived between 1964 and 1989, a time when China underwent intense transformations: Chinese people experienced the Cultural Revolution, the reform of the economy which opened the Chinese market to the West, the effervescent atmosphere of the 1980s which instances on the political arena found support in philosophy. After the limitations in the cultural sphere during the Cultural Revolution and following the novelty of the "obscure" poetry (朦胧诗, ménglóng shī)[17] that had rediscovered the individuality of the person, the 1980s saw an extremely lively production in narrative with multiple experiences often of an experimental character. Perhaps, for a young person like Haizi, it was difficult to cope with that period; to absorb the multiple stresses; to elaborate feelings, impressions, and philosophical thoughts; and finally define a personal direction of growth. Possibly, his early admission to the university made him miss his adolescence and prevented his maturity, leaving him emotionally unequipped to confront reality. The descriptions of his life in the small house in the outskirts of Peking where he mostly concentrated on writing (Xi, 2009b; van Crevel, 2008) suggest a kind of secluded life as if, in spite of his good character, he experienced solitude at a young age in a time of multifaceted turmoil.

Son of a family of farmers, in his poems, the scenery of the countryside recurs not necessarily as a lost paradise, but rather as the other side of the medal, the one he knew better. On the other hand, Haizi's poetry includes such a variety of themes that the countryside represents only one of them, though an important one as one of the titles of his poems, Tudi (Earth), underlines (Haizi, 1990).

It also seems necessary to pay special attention to the people Haizi recalls. Why was he interested in H. D. Thoreau? Was he inspired by Thoreau's ideas about the relationship man-nature, or by his belief in reincarnation? Which books of Thoreau circulated in Chinese translation? What attracted Haizi toward Van Gogh, Qu Yuan, and Mayakovsky who all committed suicide? Why was Hölderlin Haizi's most beloved poet? The variety of intellectual interests pursued by Haizi, too, poses the question of how could he, so young, possibly elaborate his personal intellectual synthesis considering the very complex biographies of his favorite intellectuals? A voracious reader, he was perhaps bombarded by the most varied solicitations that he

[17] The definition shows the difficulty of the literary critics in dealing with a new kind of poetry that, with unusual metaphors and wording, from the Cultural Revolution and through the '70s, was focusing on the individual differently from the previous poetic production entirely based on the collective. Representative poets of this trend are Shi Zhi 食指, Genzi 根子, Mang Ke 芒克, and Duo Duo 多多.

chose among those that best represented his personal situation but eventually was trapped by them for lack of experience.

A careful investigation is needed also on Haizi's poetic style: whereas at times the total lack of punctuation seems to suggest an ideal relation to Chinese classical poetry, Haizi's familiarity with the vocabulary of the words referring to death and the immediacy in their use raises the question of whether this should not be considered as an alarm bell (Haizi, 2016).

Finally, the wave of interest aroused by the news of Haizi's violent death by suicide, the publication of various volumes of his poems, the poetry recitals, the songs made with his poems that followed, although they all show a keen interest in the poet himself; on the other hand, they also seem to be part of a cultural consumerism that, perhaps, does not do justice to the poetic quality (Haizi, 2021) of Haizi's production.[18]

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Chapter 26
Being Suicidal After Birth: Recoveries of Brooke Shields in *Down Came the Rain*, Elif Şafak in *Siyah Süt* (*Black Milk*), and Fuani Marino in *Svegliami a Mezzanotte* (*Wake Me Up in the Midnight*) from Ecolinguistic Perspectives

Fazila Derya Agis

The American actress Brooke Shields wrote an autobiographical novel on how she suffered from depression after giving birth to her daughter and how she managed to recover afterward: it is entitled *Down Came the Rain* and was published first in 2005. After this "rain" metaphor, the "Mr. Poton" and "black milk" metaphors were used by the Turkish author Elif Şafak (Shafak) in her novel entitled *Siyah Süt* (*Black Milk*) in 2007 (English translation published in 2011). Additionally, later, in 2019, "the midnight" metaphor was used to depict the postpartum syndrome by the Italian author Fuani Marino, who attempted to commit suicide at the age of 32, in 2012, in her autobiographical novel entitled *Svegliami a Mezzanotte* (*Wake Me Up in the Midnight*). All these metaphors refer to the postpartum syndrome. In this chapter, the cultural reasons for the suicidal ideas of the authors from different cultures will be analyzed, and my analyses will focus on how positive thinking about nature and arts as a therapy strategy may help suicidal people recover from their negative mental states, underlining the ecolinguistic metaphors used in these three works. These metaphors will show that all the three authors recovered from depression with the following strategies: a) appreciating ecological events; b) adopting animals; c) noticing the beauty of plants; d) respecting works of art, and e) eating healthy food.

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1 Introduction

This chapter is based on the analyses of the postpartum depression memoirs of three authors. The first memoir, *Down Came the Rain*, was written by Brooke Christina Shields, who is an American actress, born in 1965; she has two daughters and a BA in Romance languages from Princeton University (Wikipedia, 2022).

The second memoir, *Black Milk* in English, or *Siyah Süt* in Turkish, was written by the Turkish author Elif Shafak (Şafak: her exact surname in Turkish characters) who was born in 1971. She lives in England, has won several literary prizes, has a Ph.D. in Political Science, a MA in Women's Studies, and a BA in International Relations, and she has offered courses in Turkey, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Besides, she is a strong defender of the rights to free speech and gender equality (Shafak, 2020).

The third memoir is by Fuani Marino, who was born in Italy in 1980. Currently, she studies Psychology. As an Italian author, she wrote an autobiography on her postpartum syndrome entitled *Svegliami a Mezzanotte* (*Wake Me Up in the Midnight*) and another novel entitled *Il Panorama alle Spalle* (*The View Behind*). She is a journalist (Gabriele, 2020).

This chapter will analyze their works within an ecolinguistic framework, proposing that ecological descriptions and nature have healing powers.

2 Theoretical Framework: Ecolinguistics

Regarding the novels by these abovementioned three authors from different nationalities, ecological metaphors are present for depicting certain emotions: in *Down Came the Rain* by Brooke Shields (2005), the rain metaphor refers to postpartum depression; otherwise, having a baby brings happiness, thus sunshine. The orientation of "down" and "darkness" are also sadness metaphors; besides, sadness brings long-term suffering: "sadness is down, sadness is a burden, and sadness is dark" as suggested by Kövecses (2010, p. 752). Furthermore, according to Kövecses (2013), an abstract concept can be defined with a concrete concept as in "resemblance metaphors" or "correlation metaphors" based on parts of objects; thus, metonymies and these metaphors are constructed, processing information about event-frames in the human mind (p. 75). "Happiness is the sun" is a resemblance metaphor as people are happy and having fun outside where the weather is sunny. "Sadness is rain" is also a resemblance metaphor as sad people cry, and dark weather makes people stay at home. However, "sadness is down" is an "orientational" metaphor, for depicting a direction (Nordquist, 2020).

In addition, Zinken (2003) proposes that culture-based imagination leads to "intertextual metaphors" such as the following sentence: "scientific progress leads to new Frankensteins" (p. 509). This sentence criticizes wrong medical and technical applications; besides, those who know about "Frankenstein" culturally can

interpret and understand it. In Shelley's (1831) novel entitled *Frankenstein, or, the Modern Prometheus*, the protagonist Victor Frankenstein is a scientist from Italy who creates a monsterlike creature. For Casasanto (2013), "correlational metaphors" are space- and time-based and may be universal (pp. 9, 15). Therefore, "your future is 'ahead'" and "leave your past 'behind'!" are sentences involving correlational metaphors, as Casasanto (2013, p. 9) explains. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) posit that conceptual metaphors are formed by matching the characteristics of a concrete object, thus a source domain with an abstract object, a target domain, considering cultural beliefs and experiences. All these metaphorical theories lay the foundations of the ecolinguistic metaphor theory of Stibbe (2015) who proposes that "source frames" are used to explain "target domains" to raise awareness on ecological issues (2015, p. 17, see also 2021). Mental frames are established through "manifestations" (Stibbe, 2015, p. 17). Metaphors formulate conceptual "areas of life" via frames (Stibbe, 2021, p. 59). Accordingly, "a source frame" derives from "an area of life," but not "a target domain" (Stibbe, 2021, p. 60). Considering climate change as "an angry beast" is constructing a cognitive metaphor; however, thinking about the lack of water by referring to "sinks" and "drains" is a "literal framing" (Stibbe, 2021, p. 61). Regarding the concept of the "target domain," the definition of the COVID-19 pandemic as "a storm" consists of a metaphor, and the social stratification of people can be described with the "boat" metaphor; people who are in different boats during the pandemics in the source frame shall be depicted with the fact that people's pandemic experiences differ from one another in the target domain after the "entailment" of the concepts where the storm depicts the pandemic, whereas the boat divergent people from different backgrounds (Stibbe, 2021, p. 62). Besides, according to Stibbe (2021), the metaphors are used for three reasons: first, they can make the message clearer through the interpretation of the text correctly for their "intertextuality" as words assume different meanings in different contexts; second, they create "emotional" effects; and third, they lead to mental processes after which their correct meanings are conceived (pp. 62–63). "Appraisal patterns" lead to positive or negative "evaluations" (Stibbe, 2021, pp. 16, 79); "erasure" removes trivial stories from the mental processes, whereas "salience" makes the significant narratives prevail (Stibbe, 2021, p. 16). The "source frame" reveals the importance of the "target domain" (Stibbe, 2021, p. 62). Some nature metaphors can be "beneficial," while others can be either "destructive" or "ambivalent" (Stibbe, 2021, p. 63). For Stibbe (2021), "nature is a machine" is a destructive metaphor since environmental destructive technology like that used in factories cannot be associated with nature (p. 64). Meanwhile, "the earth is a spaceshift" is an ambivalent metaphor for showing nature as a machine that has a limited number of products that can disappear, if humans do not take care of them (Stibbe, 2021, p. 65). However, "nature is a web" metaphor may be regarded as "beneficial" since the web involves all the creatures, including humans, and it raises awareness on the extinction of species or natural resources (Stibbe, 2021, p. 67).

Consequently, "the extinction of species is a mass murder" (Stibbe, 2015, p. 17) has a beneficial meaning for not excluding humans. As mass murders are destructive, this metaphor is ambivalent. The source frame involves a mass murder led by

evil gangs and criminals; if humans do not take care of nature, air pollution, mucilage, and climate change become guns metaphorically; we can see guns, blood, and death in a mass murder scene; both in the end of a mass murder and environmental pollution caused by the careless acts of humans, people, plants, and animals die. As "convictions" are the searches for truth in linguistic statements (Stibbe, 2015, p. 201), the reasons for which the extinction of species is dangerous shall be evident in the discourse.

Regarding the black milk metaphor used by Shafak (2011), the black color refers to depression, whereas the milk metonymy to the mother who feeds her baby with her milk. Shields (2005, pp. 81, 138, 141–144) and Shafak (2011, pp. 237–238) distinguish between the metaphorical phrase "baby blues" and postpartum depression: as the light color of blue indicates, mothers may feel sad temporarily after delivering babies; however, postpartum depression is entirely dark, thus black. For Shields (2005), postpartum depression may be caused by hormonal imbalances, and mothers who suffer from postpartum depression have sleep and eating disorders and unwillingness to move. For this reason, at the end of her book, Shields (2005) shares these emergency numbers for preventing successful suicide attempts: 911; +1800 PPD MOMS; +1800 SUICIDE. For Shafak (2011), postpartum depression is an uncle, called Lord Poton; as baby blues are not as strong as postpartum depression, it is Lord "Poton's nephew," "postnatal psychosis" is more harmful than depression, and Shafak refers to it as Lord "Poton's uncle" since it may evoke suicidal thoughts (pp. 237–238). Marino (2019) refers to the same dangerous emotions in *Svegliami a mezzanotte*. Fuani Marino, the author, threw herself down from the fourth floor: she desired to live, but there was "the gravity force"; the vertigo she felt is a metaphor for her indecision to live or die, and she does not pass away after her suicide attempt. The midnight is a metaphor for the suicidal thoughts of Marino.

Alongside these initial darkness, blackness, and night metaphors encountered in the titles of the works by three female authors, one must investigate the ecolinguistic metaphors in these works that underline that nature has healed the dark postpartum syndrome felt by the three authors. Besides, "potón" is an adjective, meaning "coarse" or "rude" in Southern Cone (Collins, 2022). Therefore, metaphorically, depression is a rude man who mistreats women and transfers them into insane, angry, and demoniac creatures who may try to kill themselves, according to Shafak (2011). In the next section, we will discover the cultural metaphorical reasons for the postpartum depression and analyze different ecological metaphors based on the recovery processes of the three authors from different countries.

3 Ecolinguistics for Revealing Natural Cures

In this section, the ecolinguistic metaphors, related to the idea that nature leads to well-being and recovery, present in the autobiographical narratives of Brooke Shields (2005), Elif Shafak (2011), and Fuani Marino (2019) will be analyzed, referring to the following recovery strategies after discussing the reasons for

postpartum depression suggested by these three authors: a) appreciating ecological events; b) adopting animals; c) noticing the beauty of plants; d) respecting works of art, and e) eating healthy food.

According to Brooke Shields (2005), the reasons for the postpartum depression can be physical, including the lack of sleep and tiredness, or social due to the lack of social support; she would litigate with her husband, for instance; besides, genetic psychological diseases may even lead to depression for her. She (2005) says that her last "five years" were destructive: her divorce, remarriage, "miscarriage," "fertility treatments," the suicide of a close friend, the decease of her father, her address change, her hard birth, and her husband's job in a different city led to her depression after delivering a baby (p. 140). Thus, metaphorically, for her (2005), "nature is a unique savior" (p. 140).

Additionally, Shafak (2011) accuses cultural teachings of leading to depression in women: the fact that women cannot pray while menstruating in Islam enervates her, and consequently, she argues that menstruation is not dirt. For her argument, she invents the Firuze (*Chalchuite*) figure as Fuzuli's poetess sister. She calls her fictional character Firuze, thus Chalchuite or "turquoise," a precious stone; besides, Firuze has blue eyes (2011, p. 32), which represent Shafak's belief in western values, because middle eastern women are usually brunettes. Fuzuli, thus Mehmed bin Süleyman Fuzuli, was born in Karbalāʾ in Iraq in 1495, and he passed away there in 1556. In 1508, the Ottomans conquered Baghdad where he used to live. He composed different poems and was known for his work entitled *Leylâ and Mecnun* where Mecnun (the mad) was in love with Leylâ (the night): Mecnun symbolizes the "human spirit," whereas Leylâ "the divine beauty" (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2022). Chalchuite or turquoise was a stone found in the middle eastern territories of the Ottoman Empire. This stone is used as a conceptual resemblance metaphor for women's preciousness and rights. Shafak (2011) depicts the first menstruation of Firuze in the following manner:

> One morning Firuze wakes up with a strange wetness between her legs and a red blotch smeared upon her nightgown. […] Sobbing, she runs to her mother. But no sooner has she said a few words than she receives a whopping slap. (p. 33)

It becomes impossible for Firuze to pray and read the Koran, while menstruating; she wants to study, but she is a woman (Shafak, 2011). Besides, she was unaware of what menstruation was as it was regarded as a shameful state for women in her culture. For this reason, her mother does not suggest her what to do, but she beats her. Within her own cultural group and family members, "Firuze is in a foreign land" as her family thinks about marrying her, although she wants to study and be famous just like her brother (Shafak, 2011, p. 34). In this situation, the ecolinguistic metaphors "nature is a friend" and "nature is a cure" appear, as she smells the fresh air and wild herbs (Shafak, 2011, p. 34). Shafak (2011) describes Firuze's nanny as "an aged concubine, a woman with skin darker than ebony" to whom Firuze confesses that she wants to attend a school to be a renowned poetess like her brother, "crocheting a lace bedspread" (p. 35). The ebony can be a metaphor for the darkness, thus ignorance of not educating female children on their rights to study and

work. The bedspread is a horrible resemblance metaphor that signifies that women can only get married and do the housework. Shafak (2011) believes that the creation of a cultural gap between women and men leads to depression among women and the possibility of the development of a postpartum syndrome after delivering children most probably after forced or obligatory marriages due to cultural beliefs. She talks about child marriages: in the end, Firuze marries an old man to settle down in Istanbul despite her desire to study and survive on her own. These delusions may lead to postpartum depression. Besides, she proposes that Pearl S. Buck can be a great role model for women as a Nobel laureate in literature. She founded an intercultural adoption center in the 1950s: "Welcome House" (Shafak, 2011, p. 41). Besides, Shafak (2011) calls herself "Miss Practical," living in Brussels for eating practical food, unlike a housewife; however, she was careful about not putting on any weight (pp. 46–47). The causes of depression can be a) hormones, b) cultural beliefs, c) negative or toxic circumstances, or d) personal thoughts (Shafak, 2011). At this point, she (2011) employs the "depression is a river" metaphor since the one who crosses it will heal, alongside the "magic mountain" metaphor as those who learn lessons and develop their talents through harsh times become successful (pp. 249–250).

Regarding the reasons for postpartum depression for Fuani Marino (2019), she does not want to "transfer illness into a metaphor" (p. 63). However, "a mental illness is darkness or midnight" for her as indicated in the title of her book (2019, p. 63). She (2019) was within obscurity; thus, she underlines her depressive state of mind in the following way: "in a fog that makes me mysterious and far way" (p. 9). She tried to commit suicide on July 26, 2012, when she was 32 years old, and approximately four months after having delivered her daughter Greta (Marino, 2019). It was the day of Saint Anne, "the protector of mothers" (Marino, 2019, p. 115). Therefore, she has never lost her faith, and accordingly, her suicidal mood was temporary. Marino thinks that the reasons for postpartum depression can be inherited genes or outside forces as argued by Jerome Kagan (2011). Marino (2019) feels empathy toward Gary Greenberg who was a psychotherapist suffering from depression and recommended dialogues with the patients on their sadness instead of medicine. However, she would not enjoy having fun on the beach, but she would appreciate having a rest on the mountains. Thus, metaphorically, for Marino (2019, p. 142), "mountains are therapists" and "nature is a shelter," as she enjoys being on her own for recovering from negative ideas. In the next section, the ecological events that make the three authors celebrate life will be analyzed.

3.1 Appreciating Ecological Events

Brooke Shields, Elif Shafak, and Fuani Marino find refuge in nature sometimes. Brooke Shields got married in a house by the ocean. Thus, "oceans are freshness and new starts" (2005, p. 10) for Brooke Shields who married her husband by the ocean and started a new period in her life.

Brooke Shields uses the metaphor "the sun is happiness" in the last chapter of her book since she recovered from depression after a year after having delivered a baby (2005, p. 215).

Shafak (2011, p. 226) refers to the metaphor "melancholy is a black sun." Therefore, a black sun cannot shine and "sunshine is joy" since depression stops; thus, Lord Poton cannot be seen around after a recovery period just like the "fog" that disappears "in the sunlight" (Shafak, 2011, p. 257). "The fog is depression" and "sunlight is well-being" here as ecolinguistic metaphors (Shafak, 2011, p. 257). Shafak (2011) was unhappy about not only "the melting icebergs in Antarctica" but also "the polluting of the atmosphere" (p. 188). Thus, "ecological destruction is depression" metaphorically, and humans must join their forces to protect the environment as they need water and fresh air to survive (Shafak, 2011, p. 188). When people feel sad, they drink water and take some fresh air.

Additionally, Marino (2019) feels sad about having attempted suicide and passing the summer in the hospital, seeing a summer photo of her husband Riccardo and her daughter Greta by the sea in August.

3.2 Adopting Animals

Apart from sunshine, animals give happiness to the three authors. Brooke Shields (2005) depicts that Rowan's first birthday party's theme was "Finding Nemo," and they decorated the party hall "with orange balloons and blue and orange fish lights"; her bulldog "Darla" is at the party too and made her daughter dance by pressing on her toy that plays music (pp. 220–221). Andrew Stanton authored and directed the animated film, *Finding Nemo*, that Walt Disney Pictures "released" in 2003. The protagonist clownfish called Nemo was kidnapped, and his father is trying to find him in the film by Stanton (2003). In fact, pets may bring luck and happiness in some life circumstances: Darla made Brooke Shields meet her husband "in the gym on the Warner Bros lot" (Shields, 2005, p. 6).

Additionally, Shafak (2011) dreams about "birds chirping in an Australian rain forest" (p. 189). For relaxing, Shafak (2011) preferred "the peaceful sounds of Mother Nature" (p. 189), employing the "nature is a mother" metaphor since nature provides all the creatures with food and calms them down with its sounds, similarly to a mother singing a lullaby to her baby. She is sad about forgetting two turtles offered her as birthday gifts due to her depressive mental state. Meanwhile, Shields (2005) remembers burying her turtle pet with sadness by a river. Besides, Shafak (2011) associates birds with women due to a Turkish proverb: "The female bird builds the nest" (p. 18). However, she adds that women are as free as birds that build nests in different places.

Concerning Marino (2019), her father brought her "dogs, cats, birds, ducks, rabbits, and chicken" as gifts (p. 22). She mentions that the protagonist Dorothy sings happily under a clear sky in a farm in *The Wizard of Oz*, a film directed by Victor Fleming et al. (1939) and based on L. Frank Baum's (1900) novel where Dorothy

tries to return to her uncle's Kansas farm with her dog from a magical rural land. Thus, nature is a refuge and pain reliever for Marino (2019). She has a cat and compares her depressive state to him, as he licks himself frequently at home, and she is unwilling to leave her house just like him. However, the cat teaches her to be clean and happy to have a home to reside in, in fact.

Concisely, for all the three authors, animals are close friends, empathy builders, and therapists metaphorically, considering their life experiences with their pets that teach humans that life is not eternal, and one must enjoy it instead of feeling sadness constantly.

3.3 Noticing the Beauty of Plants

Animals teach humans to enjoy life, as do the plants. Brooke Shields (2005) loves staying "in the room overlooking Central Park" in a hotel in New York (p. 94). Moreover, she (2005) called her daughter Rowan, because "a huge red oak tree" is called Rowan in an Irish legend (p. 48). She enjoyed watching Rowan under a tree during a hiking session break, and she loved seeing colorful Christmas trees, as the one in the Rockefeller Center, and decorating another at home. Trees are happiness and well-being for Shields (2005), as they make her feel relieved.

Besides, Shafak (2011) imagines her inner voice as a female saint, called Dame Dervish, and happy with little. This saint recommends her not to criticize anything, but to enjoy and experience life: she has petunia in a pot. Consequently, flowers are joy. In a public WC, Shafak (2011) encounters "a finger-woman" who confesses her that she likes "hanging bamboo wind chimes on the porch, growing begonias in cute little pots, pickling vegetables in the summer, making pink grapefruit marmalade," etc. (pp. 108–109). Furthermore, Mama Rice Pudding has "tulips," "carnations," and "hyacinths" on the "window ledge" of her house (Shafak, 2011, pp. 178–179). These are the inner voices of Shafak who try to convince her about the beauty of life. Thus, plants are remedies and therapists, as they fight against negative emotions with their colors and smells. Finally, Shafak (2011) expresses her happiness with colorful tulip descriptions.

Additionally, Marino's (2019) father constructed a red wooden house on the terrace for her; she decorated one of its walls with flowers. Moreover, she would prefer dresses with flower designs. For her, flowers are well-being and health, accordingly.

3.4 Respecting Works of Art

Also, nature descriptions in the arts may have healing powers. Brooke Shields (2005) has selected a name for her daughter after reading some works of art: the sister of Robin Hood is called Rowan, and Anne Rice called the protagonist of her novel, entitled *The Witching Hour*, Rowan. In Nancy Springer's (2002) novel,

Rowan looks for her brother Robin Hood in the woods. In Anne Rice's (1990) novel, Rowan Mayfair has witch ancestors, and she resuscitates a drowned man in California.

Literary works are also important for Elif Shafak (2011) who imagines that Firuze, as a poetess, is the sister of the poet Fuzuli. Besides, Shafak (2011) mentions Zelda Fitzgerald, Scott Fitzgerald's wife accused of being mentally ill; she was painting and was passionate about creative writing (Milford, 1985). Zelda Fitzgerald wrote and drew pictures about green sceneries (Milford, 1985).

Marino (2019) refers to some movies and cartoons on differentiating emotions, such as *Inside Out*, directed by Docter et al. (2019), where a girl thinks about her emotional memories, Bergman's (1972) *Viskningar och rop* (*Cries and Whispers*) on the protagonist's illness, and *Nosferatu*—directed by Murnau (1922)—on a dangerous vampire. Her mother would read Baudelaire's *La Fanfarlo* (Marino, 2019) about the imaginary love of Samuel Cramer with a dancer (Baudelaire, 2008). Also, Marino refers to the painting *The Bad Mothers* by Giovanni Segantini with two women close to a winter tree without any leaves for criticizing her own depressive state. However, Segantini criticized women who aborted their children or rejected to become mothers (Moberman, 2015).

For all the three authors, arts are teachers, winter is unfriendliness, summer and spring are joy, and abundant gardens and fields are relief metaphorically, as do the art works teach.

3.5 Eating Healthy Food

After discussing the healing effects of arts, we cannot deny the importance of eating healthy food for being psychologically healthy. Brooke Shields (2005) would cook delicious meals "on the weekends," including "omelets" and "whole-wheat pancakes" (p. 166). Meal abundance is happiness for Shields.

Elif Shafak (2011) loves the scent of coconuts and would cook vegetable soup. Shafak assumes different personalities before and during her motherhood: Little Miss Practical, Dame Dervish, Milady Ambitious Chekhovian, Miss High-Browed Cynic, sexy Blue Belle Bovary, and nurturing Mama Rice Pudding. These are her inner voices: she cooks practically sometimes; she behaves as if she were a saint; she has ambitions; she may not appreciate some circumstances; she may put on sexy clothes or makeup, or she may plan to feed her baby, thus her daughter Shehrazad Zelda. Shafak (2011) underscores her low self-esteem as a depressive mother, referring to the metaphor of "a scoop of ice cream melting fast" (p. 210). Thus, "vitamins are strength," but "rotten vegetables or fruits are danger" if one considers the fruits used in making ice cream (Shafak, 2011, p. 210). "Food conservation and safety are health" (Shafak, 2011, p. 210), as the ice cream metaphor reminds us of the fact that healthy food preservation makes it long lasting, and people must take care of themselves similarly. On the one hand, she (2011) believes that Sylvia Plath would not have received any awards, if she had not hired "a nanny" (pp. 41–42). On the other

hand, Marino (2019) appreciates the journalism and poetry of the American writer and poet Sylvia Plath who committed suicide (see Chaps. 2, 20, 21, and 22 in this book). Nature is a savior that makes both authors enjoy life again, though.

Shafak (2011) prefers to be vegetarian and eating "organic spinach, organic zucchini and some kind of mixed vegetables with saffron," thus "peaceful leafy greens, such as spinach, lettuce, kale, arugula…" (p. 55). Nature is health metaphorically. Nature is medicine as vegetables and fruits cure many diseases.

Consequently, Marino (2019) would drink carrot and apple juice as a child. Marino's father's name was Furio, and her mother's name is Anita; so, she had an original name as Fuani. However, Marino's father passed away for smoking too much when she was 16 years old. Therefore, tobacco smoking is death, but fruit and vegetables are health, resulting in these other ecolinguistic metaphors: nature is a nurse, nature is a treasure, and nature is a psychiatrist that heals postpartum depression with its medicinal plants, fruits, and vegetables as well as green sceneries full of trees and fresh air to meditate.

To conclude, Shafak (2011) refers to Hélène Cixous who "describes women's writing by using metaphors of childbirth, breastfeeding and allusions to the female body" (p. 266). Thus, nature is a mother, vegetables and fruits are nature's children, and nutrition is health. In fact, in *De Rerum Natura* (*On the Nature of Things*), Lucretius (1931) identified Venus as the mother of abundant fields, thus as "mother nature" that feeds all the creatures.

4 Conclusion

To conclude, Stibbe (2015, 2021) suggests an ecolinguistic method for interpreting the meanings of ecological elements. Women must not be ashamed of speaking about hormonal imbalances and must not be discriminated. Art therapies shall teach society that women can have hormonal changes, and this is normal. Preventive measures shall be taken against excessive emotions felt during these hormonal imbalances. In all the three authors' works, we encounter these beneficial ecolinguistic metaphors, generally: nature is a shelter; food is health; nature is a psychiatrist; nature is a mother; nature is cure; animals are friends; flowers and plants are treasures; and plants are nurses. To combat against postpartum depression, these beneficial metaphors, derived from the source frames of life experiences and depicted in the three novels, targeting at explaining the importance of nature as a remedy, must be underlined: ecological events are joy; animals are therapists; plants are medicine; art works with nature descriptions that are treasures; and healthy food is well-being.

Therefore, reading literary works on postpartum depression can make societies understand and fill the gaps between women's needs and rights to education and work, as social pressures may prevent women from obtaining good work positions and force them to stay at home and develop mental illnesses based on the impediment of their achievements. Thus, one must learn the lessons expressed in works of art, and arts can cure postpartum depression as recommended by Perry et al. (2008)

and Hogan et al. (2017). Positive thinking about nature and arts as a therapy strategy may help suicidal people recover from their negative mental states, underlining the ecolinguistic metaphors used in these three authors.

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Index

A
Abandonment, 127, 167, 200, 203, 221, 261
Absurdity, 85, 86, 124, 236, 242
Abuse, 27, 38, 48, 164, 204, 261–263
Abyss, 85–87, 90, 92, 94, 233
Adoption, 261, 262, 298
Aesthetic lifestyle, 63, 71
Aesthetics, 92, 93, 111, 184, 187, 191
Afro-German, 261–263
Akutagawa, R., 115, 183
Alienation, 82, 186, 188, 199, 200, 244, 261
Allen, W., 147, 149, 153–157
American literature, 14
Animals, 10, 16, 30, 112, 191, 206, 293, 296, 297, 299, 300, 302
Anime, 201
Appearance, 10, 31, 101, 114, 155, 169, 191, 200, 208, 243, 245, 254
Ariel, 15, 19, 221, 229–231, 233–238, 254
Art, 6, 22, 75, 76, 93, 100, 179, 186, 187, 189, 191, 199, 219, 229–238, 241, 250, 293, 297, 300–302
A Thousand Plateaus, 97, 99
Autobiography, 110, 239, 294
Automatism, 203
Autonomy, 127, 166, 206
Ayim, M., 261–274

B
Bergson, H., 129, 130, 163
Biopsychology, 261
Brod, M., 63–66, 70, 71

C
Celan, P., 85–94
Childhood, 31, 32, 42, 152, 174, 175, 188, 204, 205, 207, 208, 211, 261–263
Chinese poetry, 287
Choice, 17, 41, 46, 47, 63, 99, 121–125, 139–146, 150, 175, 211, 215, 219, 221, 225, 231, 272, 283
Collapse, 4, 185, 203
Color, 183, 189, 245, 261, 285, 286, 296, 300
Communication, 85, 86, 162, 168, 240, 252, 266
Confession, 79, 147–150, 152–154, 156–159, 170, 238
Confessional poetry, 230, 234
Consciousness, 7, 10, 18, 77–81, 97, 99, 101, 151, 196, 198, 203, 209, 210, 245
Contemporary literature, viii, 196
Correspondence, 6, 39, 54, 87, 162, 163, 173, 175, 177, 178, 204
Cosmogony, 109
Creative writing, 217, 232, 301
Crisis, 42, 55, 65, 93, 94, 98, 122, 133, 147–149, 153–157, 159, 198–200, 203, 204, 230, 262, 274

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Culture, 26, 40–42, 46, 47, 54, 82, 103, 167, 186, 282, 293, 297

D
Death, 3, 4, 7–10, 14–17, 23, 25, 28, 30, 31, 33–37, 39, 41–48, 51–58, 65, 67, 69, 70, 72, 76–78, 80, 82, 83, 87, 97–99, 101–103, 109–118, 121–130, 133–136, 140, 142, 143, 145–147, 149–158, 163, 168, 173, 176–178, 180, 181, 183–186, 188–192, 195–198, 200, 203, 205, 207, 208, 211, 215, 216, 218–221, 225, 229, 231, 233–235, 237, 238, 241–243, 246, 253, 254, 261, 262, 265, 267, 270, 271, 273, 274, 280–283, 286, 288–290, 296, 302
Defamiliarization, 239, 241, 243, 246
Deleuze, G., 26, 35, 97–104, 129–136, 164, 165, 168
Delirium, 203–205
Depression, 37–39, 52, 59, 103, 139, 142–146, 180, 188, 217, 218, 222–225, 230–240, 244, 245, 249–259, 262, 264, 265, 273, 293, 294, 296–299, 302
Desire, 5, 9, 10, 18, 28, 32, 33, 37, 42, 91, 99, 100, 102, 103, 111, 113, 117, 122, 124, 126, 127, 134, 135, 140–146, 158, 164, 166, 168, 170, 174, 175, 179, 184, 189, 198, 200, 203, 205, 206, 208, 220, 246, 251, 289, 298
Destruction, 56, 101, 103, 113, 127, 144, 203, 220, 233, 299
Desynchrony, 161
Dialectic, 4, 75–77, 79–83, 166, 167
Diaries, 26, 36, 37, 63–65, 117, 158, 199, 203, 204, 221
Disability, 16, 28, 149, 164, 170, 231, 232, 242, 244, 245, 258, 259, 265, 267
Discomfort, 32, 143, 157, 161
Disease, 13, 25, 26, 30, 58, 69, 133, 142, 149, 264, 265, 271, 297, 302
Disintegration, 112, 203
Dissociation, 203

E
Early loss, 218
Ecolinguistics, 293–303
Ecstasy, 203, 205
Ego, 13, 14, 163–171, 186, 199, 204, 221
Electroconvulsive therapy, 215, 229
Emotion, 15, 19, 28, 30, 31, 38, 55, 56, 198, 221, 235, 243, 253, 255, 273, 285, 294, 296, 300–302
Ethics, 26, 111, 115, 116, 129, 130, 133, 162, 169, 170
Europe, 3, 7, 52, 233, 244, 280, 282
Existential anguish, 85, 86
Existentialism, 18, 124, 181, 230

F
Factory, 63, 66–71, 86, 122, 126, 295
Faith, 82, 147, 148, 151, 152, 155–159, 186, 187, 207, 208, 298
Falsehood, 163
Fantasy, 165, 166, 169, 170, 174, 176, 178, 179, 198, 203, 204, 207, 211, 224, 231, 254
Feminism, 230
Fiction, 4, 5, 25, 26, 39, 51, 53, 54, 58, 173–178, 197, 203, 205, 224, 225, 238, 239
Forgiveness, 54, 85, 86, 88–91, 93, 94
Freedom, 4, 6, 14, 18, 21, 23, 31–35, 45, 54, 80, 82, 83, 110, 112, 121, 124, 127, 135, 174, 180, 232, 233, 280, 281

G
Gender, 3, 5, 6, 13, 14, 16, 17, 23, 26–29, 31–33, 35, 39, 41–44, 46, 47, 54, 241, 249, 251–253, 294
German literature, xiv
Gesture, 34, 88, 99, 102, 136, 223, 243
God, 9, 20–22, 42, 54, 92, 109–113, 121–127, 147, 151, 152, 155, 158, 159, 170, 180, 191, 196, 219, 225, 231, 236
Guattari, F., 26, 35, 97, 99, 100, 103, 134, 165
Günderrode, K. von, 4–11

H
Haizi, 279–290
Hallucinations, 37, 122, 183, 185, 186, 189, 205–207, 264
Health, 43, 53, 76, 123, 129, 133, 140, 180, 185, 196, 205, 207, 257, 258, 262, 264, 266, 271, 273, 300–302
Hegel, G.W.F., 76–79, 83
Heidegger, M., 85–94
Holocaust, 21, 23, 85, 86, 89, 92, 93, 146
Hopelessness, 13, 41, 52, 57, 82, 83, 177, 207, 224, 236, 250, 257, 258

Hospital, 53, 54, 121, 122, 153, 154, 188, 189, 217, 218, 230–232, 237, 245, 264, 299
Howard, R.E., 173–182

I
Identity, 3, 6, 10, 11, 13–15, 17, 23, 25, 28, 30, 32, 34, 45, 100, 131, 196, 199, 200, 205–207, 210–211, 218, 232, 245, 246, 263
Illness, 27, 30, 36, 37, 40, 69, 97, 98, 121, 133, 136, 143, 145, 146, 158, 179, 181, 203, 207, 209, 217, 233, 235, 272, 281, 298, 301
Imagination, 56, 104, 167, 206, 207, 294
Impermanence, 147, 149, 150, 154, 156–158
Inaction, 203
Insomnia, 54, 58, 183, 185, 217, 231
Intentionality, 140
Isolation, 13, 29, 31, 41, 65, 78, 100, 102, 168, 169, 258, 271
Italian literature, xiv

J
Japan, 183, 184, 186, 196, 200

K
Kafka, F., 63–72, 282
Kierkegaard, 70

L
Language, 9, 13, 76, 85–87, 89–92, 94, 100, 131, 140, 164, 168–170, 190, 209, 210, 263, 264, 267, 270, 271, 273, 281, 290, 294
Letters, 3, 5, 10, 26, 36, 37, 41–44, 47, 48, 51, 52, 63–68, 70, 97, 99, 117, 118, 121, 126, 134, 144, 159, 173, 174, 176–180, 184, 187, 188, 209, 230–235, 237, 244, 245, 272, 274, 285
Life, 5–11, 13–19, 23, 25, 26, 29–35, 37, 38, 41–43, 46–48, 53–55, 57, 58, 63–66, 68–71, 75–78, 80–83, 86, 92, 97–100, 102–104, 112–118, 121–131, 133–136, 140, 144, 146–159, 162, 164, 167, 168, 171, 173–177, 179–181, 183–192, 195–201, 203, 204, 206–208, 211, 215–219, 221–225, 229–239, 241–243, 245, 246, 250, 252, 254, 258, 261–267, 271, 273, 274, 279–283, 288, 289, 294, 295, 298–300, 302
Life writings, 14, 18, 150, 188, 208
Lines of flight, 97–104, 135, 165
The Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC), 249, 252, 253, 266, 267, 270–272, 274
Literary style, 240, 274
Literature, 5, 11, 13, 14, 17, 23, 26, 41, 47, 51, 53, 68, 70, 71, 80, 82, 86, 110, 118, 131, 133, 134, 140, 147, 148, 174, 175, 179, 184, 186, 195, 196, 199, 201, 208, 230, 250–252, 261, 266, 298
Loneliness, 41, 237, 252, 269, 270
Love, 6, 9, 10, 16, 20, 29, 36, 69, 75–79, 81–83, 121–123, 126, 127, 136, 145, 147, 152, 159, 166, 171, 175, 187, 188, 203, 204, 211, 216, 217, 219, 233, 238, 241, 252, 262, 263, 274, 282, 297, 300, 301

M
Madness, 25–27, 30, 35, 36, 38, 39, 87, 97, 99, 103, 139, 183, 205, 208, 232, 237, 250
Mainländer, P., 109–118, 189–191
Manga, 201
Marino, F., 293–303
Martyrdom, 15, 35, 121–128
Masochism, 127
Mayakovsky, V., 75–83, 282, 289
Meaning, 10, 29, 34, 76, 90–93, 103, 110, 111, 113, 121–128, 133, 147–152, 154, 156, 158, 168, 189, 192, 199, 207, 209, 230, 236, 242, 243, 249, 259, 274, 280, 284, 288, 295, 296, 302
Medical humanities (MH), 25–27, 40
Medicine, 17, 26, 238, 298, 302
Memoir, 139, 141–143, 145, 294
Mental disease, 25
Mental health, 17, 26, 37, 39, 41, 43, 48, 59, 183, 201, 253, 274
Mental health in literature, 201
Mental illness, 13, 17, 18, 26, 29, 36, 37, 39, 41, 44, 55, 139, 145, 146, 183, 187, 190, 204, 230, 232–235, 238, 240, 245, 246, 249, 250, 298, 302
Metaphor, 23, 32, 34, 43, 207, 208, 229, 233, 234, 238, 239, 241, 243, 244, 246, 289, 293–299, 301–303
Metaphysics, 110–114
Michelstaedter, C., 161–171

Mind style, 239–247
Modernism, 196
Moral, 4, 7–9, 46, 54, 65, 67, 71, 93, 103, 114, 115, 122, 123, 126, 127, 158, 159, 168–170, 176, 196, 198, 199
Morality, 48, 51, 54, 136, 158, 161, 169
Motherhood, 33, 232, 233, 235, 238, 249, 252, 253, 301
Motivation, 7, 26, 36, 42, 64, 71, 72, 190, 215
Mysticism, 157, 279

N
Narcissism, 164–166, 219
National Socialism, 85, 86, 88
Nature, 4–9, 11, 28, 31, 43, 47, 48, 54, 55, 67–69, 75, 76, 92, 93, 98–101, 111, 129, 130, 133, 135, 136, 139, 140, 178, 179, 184, 186, 187, 191, 192, 199, 201, 206, 239, 240, 242, 243, 246, 250, 284, 287, 288, 293–300, 302, 303
Nazism, 36, 85, 86, 88, 89, 91, 92, 122
Nietzsche, F., 93, 94, 111, 129, 130, 136, 154, 162–164, 191, 282
Nihilism, 93, 163, 165
19th-century, 27, 147, 165, 169
Nostalgia, 191, 203
Nothingness, 88, 93, 109–118, 127, 151, 191, 237
Novels, 13–16, 18, 27, 29, 30, 32, 34, 51, 54–59, 67, 110, 117, 139, 141, 145, 147, 148, 176, 183, 185–187, 189, 192, 195–201, 203, 215–217, 219, 221, 222, 225, 235, 237, 239–242, 244–247, 293–295, 299–302

O
Obsession, 123, 183, 185
Omen, 55, 208
Opitz, M., 261–263

P
Pain, 5, 9, 21, 23, 43, 48, 54, 57, 90, 93, 122, 123, 127, 128, 143, 144, 171, 187, 188, 195, 205, 221, 224, 231, 234, 238, 262, 273, 288, 300
Pakistan, 41, 42, 44–48
Patriarchy, 13, 21, 48
Pavese, C., 174, 249
People of color, 261
Pessimism, 110, 111, 114–116, 183, 236, 250
Phenomenology, 77, 233
Philosophy, 4, 7, 26, 86, 88, 90–92, 97, 99, 109–118, 124, 130, 132, 135, 151, 154, 156, 159, 161, 162, 168, 176, 191, 195, 230, 280, 282, 289
Physical health, 123, 258, 271
Physician, 29, 51–53, 55, 58, 59, 174, 225
Plants, 112, 293, 296, 297, 300, 302
Plath, S., 13–23, 174, 215, 229, 251, 283, 301
Poetics, 6, 10, 23, 46, 47, 76, 78, 85–87, 90–94, 109, 110, 117, 173, 187, 209, 210, 241, 272, 279, 282, 283, 290
Poetry, 8, 9, 15, 17–19, 21, 45–47, 76, 80–82, 86–88, 90–92, 94, 110, 118, 174, 187, 203, 204, 209, 224, 225, 230, 233, 238, 249–253, 255–259, 261, 263, 264, 267–274, 280–283, 286, 289, 290, 302
Politics, 32, 43, 47, 85, 93, 103, 111, 118, 263
Pop culture, 201
Postpartum syndrome, 293, 294, 296, 298
Post-war, 196, 197, 200, 204
Practitioners, 51, 52, 54, 55, 58, 59
Prevention, 25, 26, 39, 52, 136, 161, 262, 274
Progress, 33, 70, 80, 81, 90, 113, 115, 116, 118, 146, 169, 200, 274, 294
Psychiatry, 25–32, 37, 38, 40, 102, 205, 281
Psychoanalysis, 102, 163, 164, 170, 224
Psychology, 18, 40, 103, 187, 195, 266, 281, 294
Psychopathology, 250
Pulp magazine, 173, 175, 176
Punctuation, 266, 283, 284, 286, 288, 290

R
Racism, 14
Redemption, 35, 109–118, 211
Relationship, 18, 19, 21, 36, 43, 54, 55, 67, 76–79, 86, 89, 97, 99, 102, 111, 116, 146, 152, 153, 159, 164, 179, 180, 186, 195, 216, 218, 220, 242, 249–253, 257, 258, 263, 272, 281, 289
Religion, 45, 93, 102, 103, 114, 115, 127, 155–159, 186–188, 271, 282
Repent, 88, 91
Rhizomes, 97, 99–102
Risk factors, 36, 43, 266
Romanticism, 204, 282

S
Şafak, E., 293–303
Schizophrenia, 26–40, 103, 217, 231
Self, 3, 6, 9, 10, 13, 14, 18, 25, 34, 47, 77–80, 83, 100, 103, 125, 127, 144, 145, 161, 166, 196, 197, 199, 203, 209, 210, 225, 233, 240, 244, 245, 250, 270, 273

Self-preservation, 133, 136
Sexton, A., 230, 232, 249, 251–254, 259
Shagufta, S., 41–48
Shields, B., 293–303
Society, 3–6, 9, 13, 14, 16, 18, 19, 23, 30, 32, 33, 35, 41–44, 46–48, 51, 54, 58, 65, 67–71, 80, 98, 100, 103, 114, 117, 124, 125, 165, 166, 169, 184, 186, 187, 196, 198–200, 231, 235, 246, 249, 252, 253, 265, 274, 302
Sociology, 26
Sophie's choice, 139–146
South Asian literature, 44
Spain, 51, 53, 54, 58, 59, 204
Spinoza, 129–136
Spirituality, 7, 9, 10, 92, 112, 122, 125, 147, 148, 189
Stigma, 28, 30, 139, 140, 235, 261, 262
Stigmatization, 19, 98, 232
Styron, W., 139–146
Subjectivity, 77, 97, 99, 100, 102
Suffering, 4, 21, 23, 30, 52, 55, 57, 58, 67, 82, 92, 110, 114, 121–124, 126, 127, 134, 139, 143, 145, 149, 151, 180, 185, 189–192, 203, 204, 245, 263, 272, 274, 282, 294, 298
Suicidal behavior, 140, 161, 180, 219, 225, 238
Suicidal Intent, xii, 41–48
Suicidality, 97, 99, 102–104, 229, 238–241, 246, 247, 265, 267, 273, 274
Suicidal mind, 51, 52, 55, 57, 59, 239, 241, 246
Suicidal thoughts, 23, 25, 31, 37, 52, 56, 58, 64, 66, 67, 69, 237, 273, 296
Suicide, 3, 7–11, 13, 14, 17–19, 21, 23, 25–27, 30–32, 34–48, 51–59, 63–72, 75–83, 85–89, 94, 97–99, 101–104, 109–118, 121–136, 139–147, 150, 151, 153, 154, 159, 161–171, 173, 174, 177, 179–187, 189–191, 195–201, 203, 205, 215–221, 223–225, 229–235, 237–239, 242, 243, 245, 246, 249–259, 261–263, 265–267, 270, 274, 279–282, 289, 290, 293, 296–299, 302
Suicide in literature, vii, xv, 41
Suicide narratives, 44
Surrealism, 204

T
Tedium, 183, 188
The Bell Jar, 18, 244
Therapy, 15, 17, 43, 102, 215, 217, 224, 229, 232, 244, 263, 265, 293, 302, 303
Tolstoy, L., 147–159, 282
Trauma, 15, 16, 21, 23, 28, 43, 65, 67, 68, 71, 146, 166, 204, 205, 233, 261, 265
Trigo, F., 51–59
Tuberculosis, 16, 69, 122, 123, 129, 130, 133, 180
Turkish literature, 294, 299
20th-century, 93, 121–123, 132, 135, 163, 173, 200, 229

U
Unthinkable, 143
Urdu women poets, 46–47

V
Victim, 38, 39, 56, 89, 143–146, 165, 167, 200, 207, 210
Violence, 16, 38, 42, 44, 48, 101, 114, 148, 164, 166, 169, 262, 263, 282
Vitalism, 130, 132, 135

W
Warning signs, 239, 240
Weil, S., 121–128
Werther, 4–11
West, 42, 44, 93, 174, 176, 184, 288, 289
Wolf, C., 3–6, 10
Women, 3, 5, 6, 9, 13, 14, 17–23, 27–30, 32, 33, 38, 39, 42–48, 54, 55, 57, 79–83, 117, 186, 188, 191, 195–199, 201, 206, 207, 210, 211, 216, 217, 219, 221, 222, 225, 229–233, 235, 237, 249, 252–254, 261, 263, 274, 294, 296–299, 301, 302
Women's writing, 13, 15, 302
Woolf, V., 18, 19, 26–40
Words, 4, 15, 21, 29, 32, 39, 46, 57, 65, 67, 68, 78–80, 85–94, 100, 112, 113, 127, 132, 133, 135, 136, 139, 141, 143, 158, 162, 165–170, 177, 181, 184, 187, 188, 190, 206, 208–211, 220, 221, 225, 229, 233, 236, 238–241, 245, 253–255, 258, 266, 268–270, 272–274, 279–290, 295, 297
Writing, 13–19, 23, 37, 42–46, 53, 54, 66–70, 99, 101, 102, 109, 110, 114, 118, 127, 130–132, 143, 145, 148, 150, 152, 157, 158, 161–163, 165, 167, 168, 173–176, 179, 180, 182, 183, 188, 204, 208, 209, 215, 216, 218, 219, 221, 222, 224, 229, 233, 234, 237, 238, 246, 249, 251–253, 259, 263, 265–267, 269, 271–274, 282, 289

Z
Zürn, U., 203